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**Mexico at the Precipice: Are Lessons from Plan Colombia Operationally Relevant to
United States Northern Command?**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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04 May 2009

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Abstract

The violence from Mexico's ongoing fight against narcotraffickers has reached astounding proportions and poses a national security threat to the United States. There is currently a lack of a unified course of action for United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM) with respect to Mexico. United States Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) experience during Plan Colombia can provide insight into how NORTHCOM might proceed through an integrated approach to counterinsurgency (COIN) training, border security and increased military to military cooperation. This paper will examine the history of the drug conflicts in both Mexico and Colombia and will look specifically at the Mérida Initiative and Plan Colombia. It will discuss similarities and differences between the situations in Mexico and Colombia and discuss some possible scenarios for NORTHCOM to engage Mexico. Finally, it will make recommendations for NORTHCOM to move forward.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands are being murdered each year. Drug production, addiction, and smuggling are rampant. The struggle for power among drug cartels has resulted in chaos in the Mexican states and cities along the US-Mexico border. Drug-related assassinations and kidnappings are now common-place occurrences throughout the country.ⁱ – General Barry R McCaffrey, USA, retired.

The crisis caused by the violence on America's southern border has become so acute that it has garnered the attention of the United States government at the highest levels. In its 2008 assessment of the joint operating environment the United States Joint Forces Command identified Mexico, along with Pakistan, as the states most susceptible to "rapid and sudden collapse".ⁱⁱ The government of Mexico has repeatedly and vociferously repudiated the assertion that Mexico is on the verge of state collapse.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nonetheless, there is little argument, even from within Mexico, that the war on narco-traffickers has wreaked a horrendous toll. According to Mexico's Attorney General, Eduardo Medina Mora, 6290 people were killed in 2008 in Mexico's ongoing war against powerful and ruthless drug cartels.^{iv} Those deaths represent more than twice the number of people killed in 2007 and highlight the scope of the problem facing Mexico as it seeks to disrupt the cartels.

It has become increasingly clear that the situation in Mexico poses a national security threat to the United States. Attorney General Eric Holder recently made that assertion in a news conference following the arrest of 750 individuals in the United States and Mexico during *Operation Xcellerator*.^v The instability caused by the level of violence in Mexico, coupled with corruption, lax legal enforcement, and cross-border violence into the United States does pose a significant threat to United States' national security.

The situation in Mexico can be divided into two problems with linked but separate solutions: First is the problem of the production, trafficking, and distribution of illicit drugs

into the United States. Second is the national security threat the narco-trafficking cartels pose because of their power and willingness to use overwhelming violence within Mexico and, increasingly, the United States.

The United States has expressed a commitment to assisting Mexico in fighting narco-traffickers through the Mérida Initiative and other programs. The Mérida Initiative calls for \$400 million in aid to go to Mexico in fiscal year 2009 in order to support the Mexican government with equipment, training, and expertise to combat the cartels and to establish long-term solutions to the problem of corrupt and inefficient law enforcement institutions. However, the Mérida Initiative is an incomplete solution.

The crisis in Mexico is not without precedent. United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) has been assisting Colombia in its fight against narco-traffickers since the early 1980s with a recent focus on efforts to maintain stability in the region. While the production, trafficking, and distribution of illicit drugs in the United States is a significant problem both in terms of public health and security, solving the problem of the illicit drug trade is beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper will posit the thesis that, although SOUTHCOM's experience in Colombia differs from the situation in Mexico in many ways, methods such as the COIN operations against Colombian insurgents can provide insight into possible future operations by United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM) to enhance the stability of Mexico and protect national security. This paper will address the history of the drug wars in both Mexico and Colombia as well as highlight the Mérida Initiative and Plan Colombia. The paper will then discuss the conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of SOUTHCOM's experiences in Colombia as they might apply to Mexico and will highlight some of the difficulties in

comparing the two situations, and will propose some possible operational concepts.

BACKGROUND

Mexico's Narco-Trafficking History

The tale of Mexico's drug trade is a web of official corruption, intimidation, and violence, which began over a century ago. The topic of the drug trade in Mexico cannot be addressed fully without first putting the scale of corruption into perspective. It has been rampant ever since the drug trade began in Mexico but it took on a new dimension beginning in 1910 when Álvaro Obregón was elected president representing the National Revolutionary Party (PNR).^{vi}

Though Mexico is, and was, a democracy, the PNR (which later became the Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI) was able to maintain a stranglehold on power, including the presidency, until Vicente Fox was elected president in 2000. The party so controlled every aspect of government that Mexico became a functional oligarchy ruled by the social and politically elite. The PRI established a culture of corruption in which not only the ruling elite were demanding bribes, but also the public servants. Not surprisingly, the PRI leadership was directly linked to the drug cartels throughout most of its rule.^{vii}

It is important to understand how deeply the culture of corruption is in Mexico to understand why it is so difficult to catch and bring narcotraffickers to justice in the country. If you are a politician or a policeman in Mexico you are generally either a target for bribery or a target for assassination. The most striking example was the 1997 arrest of General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo who was, at the time, the nation's drug czar.

Beginning in the late 19th century, opium and marijuana cultivation gained a foothold in Mexico's Sinaloa region. By the 1950s the drug trade had established itself in Sinaloa and

powerful families had emerged to control the organization. The Mexican government launched an offensive to shutdown the Sinaloa drug trade that only served to scatter the operation into other areas of the country.^{viii} This was the first example of what Mexican officials would come to term the “cockroach effect.” When, a cartel was dismantled in one place it would reestablish itself in another, maybe even multiple, locations.



Figure 1. The states of Mexico. (Reprinted from TAT Foundation, tatfoundation.org).

In the 1960s the marijuana and heroin trade boomed. By some estimates, up to 80% of the heroin entering the United States and even greater percentage of the marijuana entering were coming in through Mexico.^{ix} Interestingly, there was virtually no cultivation of coca in Mexico. That did not mean that there was not money to be made in the cocaine business though.

When the United States began paying attention to the Colombian drug trade in the 1970s and disrupting Colombian distribution routes through the Caribbean the Mexican

cartels capitalized. Although transshipment had been going on for decades the cocaine boom changed the entire industry. Today, the government estimates that 90% of the cocaine entering the United States is shipped through Mexico and that nearly 2% of the Mexican economy, or \$24.9 billion is derived from the drug trade.^x Additionally, due to their proximity to the border with the United States and long established contacts here, the Mexican cartels have established significant distribution networks within the United States. That means that they have the ability to control some drugs from cultivation to sale to the consumer and it means that the United States is at great risk for spillover violence.

In 1985 a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent named Enrique “Kike” Camerana was kidnapped in broad daylight from the streets of Guadalajara. His subsequent torture and murder by Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo caught the attention of Americans and exposed the link between the cartels and highly placed government officials. Gallardo was the boss of the Sinaloa Cartel and was considered to be, at the time, the most powerful drug lord in Mexico.^{xi}

The cartels in Mexico are far less stable and tend to be more violent than the cartels in Colombia were. There are strong patriarchal lines within the cartels which delineate who will maintain control of the operations when or if the boss is killed or captured. Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult to cause lasting disruption to the cartels by “cutting of the head”.^{xii}

The last ten years have seen some of the most heinous drug related violence in Mexican history. Beginning with the fall of the PRI in 2000 when Vicente Fox was elected president, Mexican authorities have taken a more aggressive stance toward the cartels. Fox launched a campaign to disrupt the cartels and to purge the government and the federal police force of corrupt elements. Fox’s initiative, while principled, did not succeed in taking out the

cartels. Instead, the cartels reacted like a cornered rabid dog. They did the only thing they knew how to do when bribery was no longer effective: kill, maim, and torture.^{xiii}

In the span of a little over a month in 2002, Ramón Arellano Félix was shot dead following a routine traffic stop in Mazatlán and his brother, Benjamín Arellano Félix, was arrested by the Mexican military. The two brothers were at the top of the Tijuana Cartel and their fall created additional havoc. The power vacuum created caused rival cartels to enter a bloody turf war with the Tijuana Cartel. The cartels, like street gangs, formed alliances of convenience with other cartels to take on rival groups.^{xiv}

In 2006 Felipe Calderón was elected president. His approach to the cartels was far more aggressive than Fox's. Since his election Calderón has increased the militarization of the drug war in Mexico. This is likely due to the fact that the federal police both lack the capacity to accomplish the mission and because the military (SEDENA) is generally regarded as the institution in Mexico most immune to corruption.^{xv} By 2008, Calderón had deployed 40,000 troops and 5,000 federal police to combat the cartels. Calderón continues to be faced with the challenge of a system that is not equipped to handle the narcotraffickers who are caught. The judicial system remains rife with corruption and the federal government is unwieldy. One study contends, "Mexico's federal structure means that approximately 3,800 law enforcement institutions exist throughout the country."^{xvi}

The brutality has increased significantly in the past year. During congressional testimony a DEA representative estimated that in 2008, 6263 people were killed in drug related violence, of which 8% were law enforcement or public officials. The testimony went on to point out that while drug violence, and even severe brutality, are not new in Mexico, the nature of the current problem has taken on a new dimension. "What is both new and

disturbing are the sustained efforts of Mexican drug trafficking organizations to use violence as a tool to undermine public support for the government’s counter-drug efforts. Traffickers have made a concerted effort to send a public message through their bloody campaign of violence,” the agent reported.

Today, the situation is more complex than ever. Government pressures and arrests have created fractures, infighting, and new alliances amongst the cartels. The status quo is literally changing on a daily basis. Figure 2 represents the most current make-up of the powerful cartels and the regions they control.

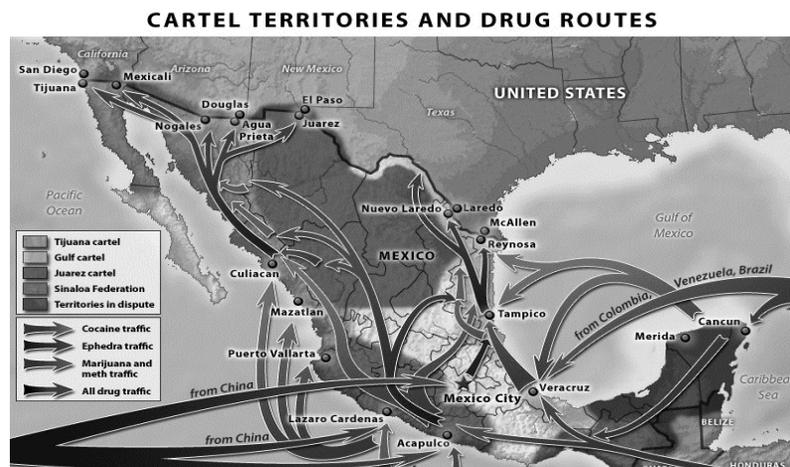


Figure 2. General areas of influence for Mexican drug cartels. (Reprinted from “When the Mexican Drug Trade Hits the Border,” *STRATFOR*, 15 April 2009.)

However, the arrest of the head of Los Zetas, a group of ex-military men who started out as killers for the Gulf Cartel but are now positioning for their own cartel, could change the whole equation.

The Mérida Initiative

Organized crime syndicates are modern enemies of democracy that relentlessly engage in kidnapping and assassination of political figures, and traffic not only in addictive and lethal substances, but also increasingly in human beings. To create an environment conducive to success in their criminal interests, they engage in heinous acts intended to instill fear, promote corruption, and undermine democratic governance by undercutting confidence in government. They assassinate or intimidate political figures and pollute democratic processes through bribes and graft in cities along both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border.^{xvii}

In general, the United States has lacked both the political will to get involved in the Mexican drug war and a coherent strategy for doing so. In an effort to develop a more coherent approach to the problem the United States Bush administration crafted the Mérida Initiative in conjunction with the Mexican government.

The Mérida Initiative is intended not only to provide Mexico with direct monetary and tangible assistance but also to establish a new level of cooperation and dialogue between the two nations. While the bill calls for \$1.4 billion in aid over three years, it will provide \$400 million in 2009 for assistance to Mexico to include:

- Non-intrusive inspection equipment, ion scanners and canine units
- Technologies to improve and secure communications systems that collect criminal information
- Technical advice and training to strengthen the institutions of justice- vetting for the new police force, case management software, to track investigations through the system, new offices of citizen complaints and professional responsibility, and witness protection programs
- Helicopters and surveillance aircraft to support interdiction and rapid response of law enforcement agencies^{xviii}

Additionally, the program provides for a domestic element, which includes efforts to, “reduce drug demand, stop the flow of arms and weapons, and confront gangs and criminal organizations.”^{xix} It is worth noting that of the 10,579 weapons the Mexican authorities confiscated in 2005, 90% of them came across the border from the United States.^{xx}

Colombia’s Narco-Trafficking History

In the minds of most Americans no country is more associated with narco-trafficking and production than Colombia. Although trade in marijuana can be traced back to the 1930s in Colombia, the modern-day era of narco-trafficking in Colombia began in the late 1960s when drug use in the United States exploded, causing increased demand for illicit drugs of all

stripes. In fact, it is estimated that by 1978 three quarters of the marijuana trade in the United States originated in Colombia.

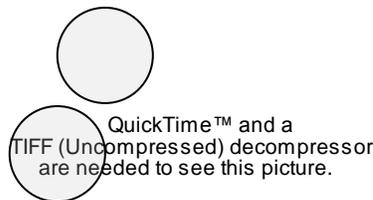


Figure 3. Areas of major cartel activity in Colombia during the 1980s and 1990s. (Reprinted from U.S. Department of State, 17 October 2008).

The Colombian marijuana trade was centered on the Caribbean coast where it was estimated that 30,000 to 50,000 farmers cultivated the crop for export.^{xxi} The dispersal of the growing meant that the marijuana industry lacked a significant command and control structure. While it spawned some violence, it did not create the kinds of vicious and powerful cartels the cocaine trade soon would.

In contrast, cocaine trafficking was in its infancy in Colombia in the 1960s. In the beginning, Colombia was merely a transit route for product grown and refined in neighboring countries like Peru and Bolivia. Cocaine transport was usually the purview of individuals as compared to organized groups and was neither well organized nor centrally controlled.

In 1971 President Richard Nixon declared that illicit drugs were “public enemy number one” and coined the enduring phrase “war on drugs” to encompass the government’s

efforts to curb the import and use of narcotics in America.^{xxii} The effort had the indirect effect of fomenting the growth and consolidation of the cocaine industry in Colombia. By the mid-1970s, enterprising traffickers were processing coca locally for export from Colombia.

Whereas the marijuana trade was a decentralized, populace industry, the cocaine trade rapidly developed into a centrally controlled, highly organized, and highly efficient entity. As early as 1977, the DEA had identified the early beginnings of the Medellín syndicate as the dominant player in the industry.^{xxiii}

In the United States it was a turf war in Florida waged by the Medellín syndicate against rival suppliers from Cuba that got American's attention. The violence in Florida became known as the "Cocaine Wars" and claimed 101 people in 1981.^{xxiv} The violence garnered the renewed attention of President Ronald Reagan's administration and in 1982 the administration was successful in lobbying the Colombian government to enact extradition laws allowing the extradition of narco-traffickers indicted in the United States.

At the same time, a sea change was occurring within the Medellín syndicate. A new generation of savvy and ruthless businessmen were seizing control of the loosely organized syndicate and consolidating the cocaine industry under their organization through the use of coercion and violence, a tactic that would come to represent the modus operandi for narcotics cartels across the globe.

While several young men would emerge as key leaders within the organization, Pablo Escobar would come to be the United States' enemy number one in the war on drugs. Escobar's power and influence were so great even in the early years that he was elected to

the Colombian Congress in 1982 where he was able to lobby against the very same extradition laws enacted to bring him to justice.^{xxv}

The Medellín Cartel was so dominant that by their own estimate they controlled 80% of the cocaine market in the United States by 1984.^{xxvi} Pablo Escobar continued to consolidate his power throughout the 1980s, becoming ever more violent and increasing his wealth. In 1988 Forbes Magazine listed Escobar as the seventh richest man in the world and in 1989 he was linked to the assassination of presidential candidate, Luis Carlos Galán who was threatening to launch a crackdown on the cartels.^{xxvii}

Developing at the same time was another major cartel called the Cali Cartel. Whereas the Medellín Cartel was a highly centralized, vertical organization which valued ruthlessness and violence as the means of gaining and holding power, the Cali Cartel operated with a much more horizontal organization. The Cali Cartel generally took a more sophisticated approach to narco-trafficking than Escobar's Medellín Cartel. They focused more on gaining political influence through bribery instead of intimidation and had sophisticated and effective counterintelligence networks to advise them of government offensives against them.^{xxviii}

The narcotics trade was not the only troubling problem facing the Colombians at the time. In 1966 a group of peasant guerillas organized into a group called the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) or FARC. The FARC often targeted wealthy farmers, many of who were wealthy because of their involvement in the drug trade. This placed them directly at odds with the cartels and the officials who were being bankrolled by the cartels. The coca growers and the guerillas both

sought to establish footholds in the jungles and remote locations for the common purpose of evading the military.

In 1981 the leftist insurgency group M-19, which was likely an offshoot of the FARC, kidnapped the daughter of drug kingpin Fabio Ochoa of the Medellín Cartel. In response a group of traffickers from across the cartels funded and formed a paramilitary group called *Muerte a Secuestradores* (Death to Kidnappers) to gain the freedom of Fabio Ochoa's daughter.^{xxix} The cartels began to employ paramilitaries, generally with tacit approval from the government, to counter the insurgency groups like the FARC in a battle that became increasingly violent.

In what an Army War College analysis called the “narco-insurgent-paramilitary nexus”, the cartels, the paramilitaries, and the insurgents eventually realized that they were, simultaneously, doing business with each other, killing each other, and fighting for their own survival.^{xxx} All were under pressure from the government and all required inflows of cash for survival.

The insurgents generally controlled the remote areas in which the cartels sought to establish their coca farms. Typically, the insurgents represented the largest armed group within these remote regions giving them the ability to charge the cartels a “use tax” to let them grow in the region without attacks by the insurgents. While the cartels often paid these remittances out of necessity, they would also frequently respond by funding the paramilitaries to counter-target the guerillas.

The United States in Colombia Before Plan Colombia

While the United States had been involved militarily, economically, and diplomatically since the early 1980s in Latin America countries like El Salvador and

Nicaragua, the primary focus had been on stopping the spread of communism. Following the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán in 1989, the Bush administration allocated an additional \$142.1 million to existing counter drug programs in the Andean region to combat narco-trafficking and cartels in Colombia. National Security Directive 18 directed the United States government to provide military equipment, training, assistance, and intelligence support in order to, “pursue the major Andean drug cartels wherever and however they choose to operate with all means available to our government consistent with applicable law.”^{xxxix} The policy did not authorize the military to take direct action.

The United States and Colombia encountered both success and friction in terms of the military effort. Proceeding on tips from the Cali Cartel and signals intelligence (SIGINT) gathering capabilities, a Colombian Army Special Forces unit called Search Bloc located and killed Pablo Escobar in December 1993.^{xxxix} That left the Cali Cartel as the sole major cartel in Colombia and potentially opened up production opportunities for the insurgents.

In 1995, the Colombian government apprehended all the major players in the Cali Cartel. Their imprisonment in Colombia essentially ended the grip of the cartels on the cocaine market although some observers believe that the cartel continued to run some operations from prison. The Orejuela brothers, who had been at the top of the Cali Cartel, were extradited to the United States and tried for money laundering and drug trafficking, each receiving 447-month prison terms in 2006.^{xxxix}

In recently declassified reports from 1991 and 1992 respectively, both the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency claimed that the guerillas were inextricably linked to the drug trade in Colombia, suggesting the need for a COIN component to United States policy.^{xxxix} In contrast, the Drug Enforcement Administration contended in a

1994 report that, “no credible evidence indicates that the national leadership of either the FARC or ELN has directed, as a matter of policy, that their organization directly engage in independent drug production or distribution.”^{xxxv}

There were also strong indications that the Colombian government was using aid allocated for counternarcotics to fight the insurgents in violation of the assistance agreement, leading critics to call for an end to the program. The government’s uncertainty about Colombia’s cooperation under President Ernesto Samper in countering drug trafficking led the United States to “decertify” Colombia between 1996-1999. Decertification meant that United States aid to Colombia for the drug war was cut nearly in half.^{xxxvi}

In the United States, concern over human rights abuses and government support to paramilitaries led the United States to implement human rights benchmarks for Colombian aid. The “Leahy Law” required the United States to certify that units used in counternarcotics operations be free of individuals linked to human rights violations. Due to Colombia’s lax enforcement of human rights, only 11 units were certified by 1998 to work with Joint Task Force South (JTF-S).^{xxxvii}

Plan Colombia

When Colombians elected Andrés Pastrana to be president in 1998, it was apparent that the drug trade had shifted from the largely defunct cartels to the increasingly powerful insurgents. By 1998 the FARC had emerged as the dominant group in the guerilla movement. Pastrana was elected on a platform of engaging in peace talks with the FARC.

The United States viewed the Pastrana administration as an opportunity to reengage with Colombia in the drug war. Government officials were beginning to talk about the threat posed by the FARC to Colombia’s stability and the mood was shifting to support for a

military solution in Colombia.^{xxxviii} In response, Pastrana began working in concert with the United States government to develop “Plan Colombia.”

Plan Colombia would concentrate on five key elements: the peace process, stabilization of the economy, the anti-drug campaign, reforms to the judicial system including the promotion of human rights, and democratization.^{xxxix} Pastrana proposed that the program would require \$7.5 billion in funding with \$4 billion coming from Colombia and \$3.5 billion coming from the international community.^{xl}

With renewed political momentum to find a viable political solution in Colombia, President Clinton proposed a slightly modified version of Plan Colombia. It proposed that the United States assistance be focused on: support for human rights and judicial reform, expansion of counternarcotics operations into southern Colombia, alternative economic development, increased interdiction, and assistance for the Colombian National Police.^{xli} The United States would shoulder \$1.3 billion of the cost.

While recognizing the importance of the Colombian peace process with the insurgents as a critical aspect of a long-term solution and increasing support to the military, the plan stated that United States aid money was to be used for counternarcotics operations. Plan Colombia made it clear that United States military forces would not be used for direct action, stating, “All U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia will continue to be in the form of training, goods, and services.” The plan also reaffirmed the human rights requirements under the “Leahy Law” and established screening and monitoring requirements with respect to human rights.^{xlii}

Shortly after Plan Colombia was implemented, President George W. Bush was faced with the seemingly unrelated crisis of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center.

The attacks would, to a great extent, shape United States policy toward Colombia. The President's National Security Strategy for 2002 marked a major shift in policy regarding the insurgents in Colombia said:

In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups. We are working to help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed groups of both the left and right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provide basic security to the Colombian people.^{xliii}

The United States viewed the insurgent problem and the drug problem in Colombia as one and the same and began the use of the term "narcoterrorists" to describe groups like the FARC.

In 2002 President Álvaro Uribe was elected with the goal to root out and break up the insurgent groups completely. To do so he levied a 1.2% one-time tax on the assets of the wealthiest Colombians, generating over \$650 to fund military spending.^{xliv}

The lead for the United States military assistance to Colombia fell to United States Southern Command. As the Combatant Commander for South America, SOUTHCOM coordinated all aspects of military assistance for Colombia, which by 2005 received the fifth most American military aid of any country.^{xlv} SOUTHCOM's mission, in concert with the initial Plan Colombia, was centered on supporting Colombian counternarcotics efforts.

In the 2001 legislation SOUTHCOM was tasked with the training and equipping of two additional counternarcotics battalions. Part of the 2001 legislation limited SOUTHCOM's presence in Colombia to 400 personnel at any one time in an effort to prevent the appearance that the United States was involved in direct military action in Colombia. Of those 400, it's estimated that two-thirds to three-quarters of the personnel were Special Forces teams who trained the Colombian forces in intelligence gathering,

indirect fire, light infantry tactics, human rights, and riverine operations. The military was also responsible for the delivery of Blackhawk and Huey helicopters, reconnaissance aircraft, weapons, and equipment.^{xlvi}

When Colombian insurgent groups were officially labeled terrorist groups in 2002 SOUTHCOM shifted its mission somewhat to focus on the training of COIN tactics like small unit direct action and ambush skills.^{xlvii} Intelligence sharing at the Colombian Joint Intelligence Center increased. Previously, SOUTHCOM had avoided sharing intelligence information that might be used to target the guerillas, which severely limited the utility of the information in many cases.^{xlviii}

The United States Congress, seeking to further perceived gains by the Uribe administration, upped the cap on United States military personnel in Colombia from 400 to 800 in 2005 while keeping the restriction on involvement in direct combat actions in place. The United States also moved to equip and train Colombia's Rapid Reaction Brigade, the Comando Battalion, and the Lancero Battalion. These small units represented the Colombian Special Forces equivalent and their training was a further commitment to the COIN strategy. At the same time, SOUTHCOM was working to establish a Colombian anti-kidnapping unit called the Unified Action Group for Personal Liberty (GAULA) and placing military liaisons on Colombian planning staffs.^{xlix}

The overall success of Plan Colombia has been greatly debated because the plan came up short of its initial objective of reducing cocaine production by 50% but the data suggest that the strategy has been effective in both stabilizing Colombia and reducing the supply-side flow of cocaine from Colombia. From a peak of 163,300 hectares of coca bush in 2000 when the program was started, there was 99,000 hectares under cultivation at the end of 2008.

While 2008 did see a significant upswing in harvestable acreage; the results indicate that the aerial fumigation did have an effect. Both potential production of dry coca leaf and of cocaine decreased significantly as well between 2000 and 2008.¹

Critics argue that these gains have been achieved at the price of civil liberties and human rights. However, the United States has gone to great lengths to train and monitor the Colombian's human rights practices. In terms of stability and counterinsurgency, the results have been dramatic. According to the State Department, Plan Colombia resulted in an 80% decrease in kidnappings, a 40% decrease in homicides, and a 76% decrease in terrorist attacks between 2000 and 2007.^{li}

CONCLUSIONS

The current situation in Mexico poses a significant challenge for United States foreign policy. Plan Colombia offers insight into possible courses of action in Mexico but also highlights significant differences in the structure of the problem. Colombia can generally be regarded as a production state where the focus is on the production of cocaine. While there is some marijuana and heroin production in Colombia, it is an extremely small financial impact for the narco-traffickers in comparison to cocaine cultivation and production, which exceeded its nearest competitor by over 300 metric tons in 2008.^{lii} The transnational shipment of narcotics through Colombia does not represent a major part of the business nor does the distribution of product.

In contrast, Mexico's narcotics industry runs the gamut. It is the largest transnational trafficker of narcotics in the world. In fact, 90% of the cocaine in the world transits through Mexico. While the Mexican cartels are generally not cultivating coca, they are cultivating

both marijuana and poppy. In fact, Mexico is one of the world's largest producers of marijuana.^{liii} According to the Department of Justice's National Drug Assessment, Mexican gangs have distribution operations in at least 230 United States cities, making them the largest group of distributors in the country.^{liv}

The most important lesson learned for NORTHCOM to take from SOUTHCOM's experience in Colombia is that there needs to be a clear operational vision from the outset and the operational objective needs to be defined. This burden lies partly in the hands of the policymakers. In Colombia, SOUTHCOM was restrained by their inability to share information with the Colombian military about insurgent locations and actions prior to 2002. Once the policymakers restated the objective to include the COIN component to go after narcoterrorists, they were better able to integrate and synchronize with Colombian forces. The same is true for NORTHCOM. It will be critical for NORTHCOM to distinguish between a counternarcotics mission and a stability/COIN mission.

NORTHCOM is capable of providing valuable COIN training to Mexican forces. The use of COIN tactics as applied in Colombia and even Iraq could be applied to the dismantling of the amorphous Mexican drug cartels. It is evident from Mexico's history that striking at the head of the organization sometimes has unanticipated second and third order effects so NORTHCOM might consider training the Mexican authorities in the use of relational databases like those used in Iraq to help identify linkages in the narco-trafficking networks.

There are several challenges for NORTHCOM. There is a cultural stigma within the Mexican military, particularly the Mexican Army, toward the United States military that does not exist in Colombia. This stems from an independent spirit and a long memory for United

States incursions into Mexico. This stigma will likely make it impossible for American troops to be based in Mexico for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, both countries realize the gravity of the crisis Mexico faces and there are indications from within JTF-North that there is a new level of cooperation and engagement with the Mexican military so it seems as if the timing is ripe for rapprochement.^{lv}

The “American Service Members Protection Act” also could play a role in NORTHCOM interaction with Mexico. As a party to the International Court in the Hague, Mexico is restricted from receiving certain types of Defense Department funding and training. For instance Mexico is prohibited from receiving International Military Education and Training (IMET), and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) but it able to receive International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), Defense Department Counter-Drug Assistance, and The Regional Defense Counter-Terrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP). So, there is flexibility in the way the mission or the funding is structured. Additionally, the president has the ability to wave the restriction.^{lvi}

RECOMMENDATIONS

NORTHCOM finds itself uniquely positioned to partner with Mexico as it brings both military expertise and an insider’s knowledge of interagency operations, which is unparalleled, by any of the other combatant commanders. NORTHCOM has the capability to help Mexico maintain stability much like SOUTHCOM is helping Colombia.

NORTHCOM should consider the following operational ideas in order to enhance coordination and build trust with the Mexican military:

- Establish a COIN-training program for select Mexican forces in the United States with the long-term objective of having Mexican forces able to train their own.

This program would also include training in the use of relational databases and should engage Army North to establish professional linkages with the Mexican Army.

- Employ National Guard forces to supplement Border Patrol along the U.S./Mexico border in order to reduce both inflow of drugs and the outflow of cash and illegal guns.
- Establish a Joint Intelligence Operations Center with Mexico to facilitate the timely exchange of intelligence.
- Plan and conduct combined TSCP exercises with Mexican forces such as, disaster relief exercises, NEO, and counter-WMD exercises.
- Exchange planning staff liaisons with Mexican forces.
- Provide ISR assets and training for Mexican forces and employ additional UAVs along the border.
- Facilitate inter-agency cooperation on all aspects of counternarcotics and COIN operations with Mexico.

While the crisis in Mexico poses a threat to national security and is horrible for the people of Mexico, it is perhaps an invaluable opportunity for NORTHCOM to establish an enduring relationship and refine its Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP) with Mexico.

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ⁱⁱ U.S. Joint Forces Command, *The Joint Operating Environment 2008, 'Challenges and Implications for the Future Joint Force*. (Suffolk, VA: U.S. Joint Forces Command Center for Joint Futures, 2008), 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Penny Star, "Congressman Warns Mexico More Dangerous than Iraq, Could Become Failed State," *CNSnews.com*, 25 March 2009, <http://www.cnsnews.com/PUBLIC/content/article.aspx?RsrcID=45583> (accessed 3 April 2009).

^{iv} Associated Press, "1000 killed in Mexico drug violence in 2009," *MSNBC.com*, 26 February 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29413556/print/1/displaymode/1098/> (accessed 26 February 2009).

^v Attorney General Eric Holder, White House News Conference, 25 February 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77ONxv50oyM> (accessed 14 April 2009).

^{vi} Gordon J. Knowles, "Threat Analysis: Organized Crime and Narco-Terrorism in Northern Mexico," *Military Review* Vol. 1 (January-February 2008): 73-84. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed 25 February 2009), 74.

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^{ix} *Ibid.*

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- ^{xix} *Ibid*, 113.
- ^{xx} Bill Weinberg, "Guns: The U.S. Threat to Mexican National Security," *NACLA Report on the Americas* Vol. 41, Iss. 2 (March-April 2008): 21-28, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed 25 February 2009), 21.
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- ^{xxiii} GPO.
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- ^{xxv} Shannon, 98.
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- ^{xxix} Shannon, 104.
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