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Fear and Loathing in Mexico: Narco-Alliances and Proxy Wars

| Irina Chindea

“Cartel attacks are thus not meant solely to batter the police and the military, but also to sow fear and demonstrate that the cartels—not the government—are dominant in Mexico.”¹

In December 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto took the helm of Mexico’s presidency after running on an electoral agenda in which he distanced himself from the Calderón Administration’s (2006-2012) security policies against organized crime. These policies have received substantive criticism over the past years for leading to a direct increase in violence in the country. The total number of homicides for the Calderón Presidency doubled, reaching approximately 120,000, over those recorded during the previous administration of Vicente Fox Quesada (2001-2006).² The number of organized crime style executions—over 60,000³—associated with Felipe Calderón’s war on drugs significantly surpassed the

threshold of 1,000 battle-related deaths within a twelve months period – the definition of war according to the Correlates of War Project.⁴ The levels of violence in this internal conflict have been comparable to those in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, Calderón’s war against the drug cartels had other unintended effects. It transformed Mexico into the most dangerous country for journalists in the Western Hemisphere—and the eighth worldwide⁵—with 67 journalists murdered and 14 disappeared since 2006.⁶ Last but not least, for three consecutive years (2008, 2009, and 2010) Ciudad Juarez, the second largest metropolitan area on the border with the US, registered the highest rate of homicides worldwide, earning the nickname “Murder City.”⁷

1 Brands, H. (2009). Mexico’s narco-insurgency and US counterdrug policy, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

2 “Drug Violence in Mexico – Data and Analysis Through 2012,” page 13, Special Report of Justice in Mexico Project, February 2013, by Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, <http://justiceinmexico.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/130206-dvm-2013-final.pdf>

3 “Drug Violence in Mexico – Data and Analysis Through 2012,” page 16, Special Report of Justice in Mexico Project, February 2013, by Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, <http://justiceinmexico.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/130206-dvm-2013-final.pdf>

4 This is the definition of war according to the Correlates of War Project, http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/WarData_NEW/COW%20Website%20-%20Typology%20of%20war.pdf

5 “The Effects of Drug War Related Violence on Mexico’s Press and Democracy,” by Emily Edmonds Poli, April 2013, a Wilson Center – Mexico Institute and University of San Diego Trans-border Institute Working Paper in the “Civic Engagement and Public Security, page 12. in Mexico Series,” http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/edmonds_violence_press.pdf

6 Data from Mexico’s General Attorney’s Office (PGR) cited in “The Effects of Drug War Related Violence on Mexico’s Press and Democracy,” by Emily Edmonds Poli, April 2013, a Wilson Center – Mexico Institute and University of San Diego Trans-border Institute Working Paper in the “Civic Engagement and Public Security in Mexico Series,” http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/edmonds_violence_press.pdf

7 “Por tercer año consecutivo, San Pedro Sula es la ciudad más violenta del mundo,” by José

Today, more than one year into the new Peña Nieto Presidency, violence in Mexico has not significantly subsided,⁸ and the country has witnessed an increase in kidnappings,⁹ forced disappearances,¹⁰ and extortion.¹¹ Despite the promises made on the campaign trail, the 18-month old Peña Nieto Administration still has not been able to carry out the security measures that it intended, such as the creation of a new security force under the guise of a national gendarmerie.¹² On the contrary, its security pol-

icies have *de facto* remained the same as those of the previous administration.¹³ Equally, they have contributed to the festering of the narco-violence problem that the country has been facing over the past seven years, and that has resulted in the rise of the self-defense forces across the country, particularly in rural areas and the state of Michoacán.¹⁴

In this context of ongoing internal conflict characterized by soaring and persistent violence, Mexico presents an extremely interesting and rich case for the study of alliances among non-state armed groups¹⁵ and their use of proxies in fighting both the state and their rivals. Similar to the traditional dynamic

A. Ortega, Seguridad, Justicia y Paz, January 2014, <http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/biblioteca/view.download/5/177>

8 Molly Molloy, "Peña Nieto's First Year: Iraq on Our Southern Border," Small Wars Journal, January 7, 2014, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/pe%C3%B1a-nieto%E2%80%99s-first-year-iraq-on-our-southern-border>, link last accessed on March 17, 2014.

9 Report "Estudio del mes de junio 2013 sobre las denuncias de los delitos de alto impacto," by Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano cited in "Mexico Kidnappings Highest in 16 Years," InsightCrime, September 16, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/mexico-kidnappings-highest-in-16-years>; Paul Rexton Kan, "The Year of Living Dangerously: Peña Nieto's Presidency of Shadows," Small Wars Journal, January 6, 2014, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-year-of-living-dangerously-pe%C3%B1a-nieto%E2%80%99s-presidency-of-shadows>

10 Ben Leather, "One year into Enrique Peña Nieto's Government: Where are all the disappeared people?" December 1, 2013; https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/where_are_all_the_disappeared_-_by_ben_leather.pdf;

11 "Análisis de la extorsión en México 1997-2013: Retos y oportunidades," Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano, 2014, pages 36-37 <http://onc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Interiores-Extorsio%C3%ACn-02-ONC-Digital-final22febrero1.pdf>

12 "Incoming Mexican President Peña Nieto looks to reshape dialogue with US," by William

Booth and Nick Miroff, The Washington Post, November 30, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexicos-new-president-to-shift-dialogue-with-us-from-drugs-to-economy/2012/11/30/f2bd7f58-39c3-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_story.html

13 Sylvia Longmire, "Disappointment is the Hallmark of EPN's First Year in Office," Small Wars Journal, January 13, 2014, document available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/disappointment-is-the-hallmark-of-epn%E2%80%99s-first-year-in-office>

14 "A Quandary for Mexico as Vigilantes Rise," by Randal C. Archibold, The New York Times, January 15, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/16/world/americas/a-quandary-for-mexico-as-vigilantes-rise.html?_r=0

15 According to the typology proposed by Shultz, Lochard and Farah, criminal groups together with terrorist, insurgent and warlords are one of the four main categories of non-state armed groups that they propose. Shultz, R. H., et al. (2004). Armed groups : a tier-one security priority. Colorado Springs , Colo., USAF Institute for National Security Studies, USAF Academy.

in proxy wars, in which states use other states or armed groups to fight wars on their behalf and bleed their rivals, in the internal conflict in Mexico, a variety of actors, including non-state groups, have used criminal organizations as proxies leading to a protracted struggle with many casualties among the narco-traffickers, state forces, and the civilian population.¹⁶

Beyond the Mexican case, we witness similar patterns of alignment among non-state armed groups fighting as proxies around the globe. The Colombian “bacrim” (or *bandas criminales*)¹⁷ and the Central American gangs whose infighting over past years has led to a massive number of refugees crossing the border illegally into the United States¹⁸ are two relevant examples of internal conflicts among criminal groups carried out by proxy that have had significant spillover effects across the region. The alignment of the main actors in the Syrian civil war (e.g., Al Nusra Front, The Free Syrian Army) with both

"This article approaches the proxy wars debate from a new angle that considers the shifts over time in balance of power between the sponsor and the proxy, be they the state or non-state armed groups, in the context of an internal conflict."

state and non-state entities such as Hezbollah, Iran, Al Qaeda, and Saudi Arabia, among others, represents another striking example of massive internal violence conducted by proxies in more complex relationships with one another than traditionally conceived of,¹⁹ translating into a high number of casualties, displaced individuals, and refugees flooding into neighboring countries and beyond.²⁰

Hence, the findings from the Mexican case are illuminating for other cases in which violent non-state actors are involved as proxies. These insights are

16 “Drug Violence in Mexico – Data and Analysis Through 2012,” page 13, Special Report of Justice in Mexico Project, February 2013, by Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, <http://justiceinmexico.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/130206-dvm-2013-final.pdf>

17 “Rebels, BACRIMS Ally in Northern Santander,” by Elysa Pachico, Insight Crime, February 21, 2011, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/farc-eln-allied-with-drug-gangs-in-northern-santander>

18 “Hoping for Asylum, Migrants Strain US Border,” by Julia Preston, The New York Times, April 9, 2014.

19 “Proxy war between Iran, Saudi Arabia playing out in Syria,” by Ashish Kumar Sen, The Washington Times, February 26, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/feb/26/proxy-war-between-iran-saudi-arabia-playing-out-in/?page=all>

20 UNHCR—Syria Regional Refugee Response, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

particularly relevant in the current international security environment in which the lines between non-state armed groups with political goals and those mainly driven by financial incentives are increasingly blurred.²¹ Today, many terrorist and insurgent organizations rely on criminal business ventures to sponsor their activities, while an increasing number of criminal groups reach into the political sphere and exert a profound influence in local and national affairs.²² The extent to which such criminal entities challenge the traditional political makeup of the state has led some practitioners and journalists to refer to the violence in places like Mexico as a “narco-insurgency” or “criminal insurgency.”²³

This article approaches the proxy wars debate from a new angle that considers the shifts over time in balance of power between the sponsor and the proxy,

be they the state or non-state armed groups, in the context of an internal conflict. Given such shifts in the balance of power, the article explores the way in which proxies turn on their sponsors and new proxies are found in the under-world, leading to a reconfiguration of alliances on the ground that allows for the violence to continue unabated, protracting the internal war.²⁴

Mexico is an excellent case study for examining these dynamics. This article will in particular examine the following questions: What roles do proxy non-state armed groups²⁵ play in the Mexican internal conflict? How do the alliances they forge with other criminal organizations and state actors influence the balance of forces on the ground? What impact do the shifts in balance of power among the criminal groups and between the cartels and the state have on the levels of violence in the country?

The answer to these questions is relevant not only for disentangling the situation in Mexico where the reconfiguration of alliances on the ground and use of cartel proxies did not receive appropriate con-

21 “Making Good Criminals: How to Effectively Respond to the Crime-Terrorism Nexus,” by Vanda Felbab-Brown, InsightCrime, April 8, 2014, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/making-good-criminals-how-to-effectively-respond-to-the-crime-terrorism-nexus>

22 “Criminal Groups: Multifarious Threats to State Capacity and Security. Economic and Political Spillover Effects of Organized Criminality,” by Irina Chindea and Byron Ramirez, upcoming in April 2014 in the Small Wars Journal – El Centro.

23 “States of Change: Power and Counter-power Expressions in Latin America’s Criminal Insurgencies,” by John P. Sullivan, International Journal on Criminology, Volume 2, Issue 1 • Spring 2014; Grillo, I. (2011). *El Narco : inside Mexico’s criminal insurgency*.

24 In her work on alliances in civil wars, Fotini Christia makes a rather similar argument regarding the relationship between availability of allies and the protraction of civil wars. Christia, F. (2012). *Alliance formation in civil wars*. Cambridge ; New York, Cambridge University Press.

25 In this article, the terms “non-state armed groups” and “violent non-state actors” will be used interchangeably and will refer to the same umbrella category of actors that Shultz, Lochard and Farah propose in their work.

sideration when the Mexican government crafted and implemented its main security policies—the reform of police forces and the kingpin strategy—but also when considering the role of proxies in other internal conflicts as well as the effects of Mexico’s internal conflict on its neighbors. The use of US-based gangs as proxies in the fight among the narco-traffickers together with the spill of violence²⁶ and entrenchment of cartel activities over Mexico’s borders both into the United States²⁷ and Guatemala²⁸ renders finding the answers to these questions even more pressing.

This article proceeds by providing the background for the soaring violence in Mexico over the past years, the security policies the Mexican government adopted and implemented, and the way in which they have backfired and created an environment favorable to the conduct of proxy wars among the drug cartels and between the drug cartels and the state. Subsequently, this essay explores the evolution of the relation-

ship between the Mexican state and the narco-traffickers, and how the balance of power had over time gradually shifted from the state in favor of the drug cartels. The third section provides an in-depth discussion of the impact of kingpin strategy on the intra- and inter-cartel dynamics, and it is followed by a detailed analysis of the power and alliance dynamics at play among the drug cartels and their proxies. The last section concludes with policy recommendations and a discussion of the implications of proxy use in the context of the rising vigilante movement across Mexico.

RIISING VIOLENCE IN MEXICO UNDER THE CALDERÓN ADMINISTRATION

The doubling of the national homicide rate in Mexico under Felipe Calderón’s administration, from 9.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2006 when he took office, to 22 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants at the end of 2012²⁹ when he left, is often blamed on the security policies he adopted to fight organized crime. Many blame two policies in particular

26 “Mexico’s Drug Violence Seeps Over the Border,” by Ted Galen Carpenter, The Huffington Post, October 26, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ted-galen-carpenter/mexico-drug-violence_b_2023996.html

27 “This Mexican Cartel Kingpin Supplies 80% Of The Drugs Flooding Chicago,” by Michael Kelley, Business Insider, September 21, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/sinaloa-cartel-runs-the-chicago-drug-game-2013-9>

28 “Marines vs. Zetas: US Hunts Drug Cartels in Guatemala,” by Robert Beckhusen, Wired, August 29, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/2012/08/marinesvszetas/>

29 UNODC data on intentional homicide rates for Mexico from 1995 to 2012. The UNODC data is based on the information provided by Mexico National Institute of Statistics and Geography, INEGI. The preliminary report on 2012 intentional homicides published by INEGI at the end of July 2013 is available at <http://www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/contenidos/espanol/prensa/Boletines/Boletin/Comunicados/Especiales/2013/julio/comunica9.pdf>. Additional information can be found in the UNODC – Global Study on Homicide 2013 available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf

for the increase in violence: the use of federal forces in joint operations to replace corrupt local and state police,³⁰ and the decapitation of cartel leadership, or the kingpin strategy.³¹

Such multi-tiered measures were required, given the deeply entrenched, corrupt ties the Mexican security forces have had with the narco-traffickers throughout the country's modern history. Due to the high, countrywide levels of corruption of police forces, in recent years Mexico has accelerated its experiment with the involvement of armed forces in the exercise of domestic security functions. Under both the Fox and Calderón administrations, the armed forces steadily undertook domestic security functions to assist the non-corrupt elements of the government to carve out space to recruit and train a new, clean police force in lieu of focusing on its core mission of protecting the country from external threats.³² The lack of proper

training of the military for its provision of domestic security sometimes resulted in federal forces committing abuses against civilians and individuals not related to the criminal organizations.³³

Additionally, the Mexican government borrowed from the Colombian playbook the so-called *kingpin strategy*, which involves arresting, killing, or extraditing to the United States the top ranks of the cartels. Contrary to the Colombian case in which only two major criminal organizations—the Cali and Medellín cartels—were controlling the drug trade and were taken down by the government sequentially, the conditions on the ground have been markedly different in Mexico. With seven players³⁴ of large caliber controlling the main trafficking routes across the country in 2006, the Mexican government indiscriminately³⁵ engaged in violence against all the players and attempted to take them down simultaneously, instead of focusing on one group at a time.

30 David Shirk, "Justice Reform in Mexico: Change & Challenges in the Judicial Sector," in *Shared Responsibility. US – Mexico Policy Options for Confronting Organized Crime*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, *Mexico Institute*. Pages 205 – 245.

31 Nathan Jones, "The unintended consequences of kingpin strategies: kidnap rates and the Arellano-Félix Organization" in *Trends in Organized Crime*, March 2013, page 157.

32 Unfortunately, the use of the military to provide domestic security has continued under the current Peña Nieto administration, particularly in the context of the rising self-defense forces in the state of Michoacán over the past year. According to press reports, the vigilante forces proved to be the toughest challenge the present Mexican adminis-

Each of these two security strategies—internal security forces reform and kingpin strategy—have backfired, and their concurrent implementation without adequate resources on the part of

tration has faced since early 2013.

33 Human Rights Watch – World Report 2013 – Mexico report available at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/mexico>

34 The Sinaloa Federation, the Tijuana Cartel, the Juarez Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, The Beltrán Leyva Cartel, La Familia Michoacana, Los Zetas.

35 “

the government contributed to the exponential rise in violence. Alongside the structural challenges the Calderón administration faced when carrying out its security strategy, another shortfall of the administration was trying to do too much in too short a time. Calderón condensed a very ambitious plan into six years, without having the adequate means and resources to execute the strategy in a sequential manner when the necessary pre-conditions had been put in place for each set of measures to be implemented. His administration ended up implementing almost simultaneously its security policies, irrespective of their “ripeness” with disastrous effects on the country.

His security strategy became a victim of the election cycle because of the limited mandate in place for the president (six years), and for state governors and municipal councils (three years for each with no possibility of renewal). Not benefiting from sufficient time in office to be able to implement the needed reforms gradually, and constrained by pressures of the electoral cycle to show results in the light of the next election, Calderón ended up patching together his security strategy and executing it with insufficient resources and an imperfect, corrupt set of government workers.

Although most practitioners and academics consider the use of joint operations in the context of the reform of police forces and the kingpin strategy to be

the main drivers behind the rise in violence in Mexico under Calderón, these explanations largely elude an important set of dynamics. Specifically, they fail to take into account the dynamics at play among drug traffickers, between traffickers and the state, between traffickers and the general population, and between the corrupt government officials on the payroll of the traffickers and the non-corrupt government forces that aim to impose law and order.

Among these levels of interaction, two deserve a more in-depth consideration: the state-traffickers relationship, and that among the narcos themselves. The interaction between the narcos and the population is also important and has become even more so with the rise of vigilante or self-defense forces, but an in-depth exploration of this relationship is beyond the scope of this article. The findings concerning the shifts in alliances and use of proxies at the two levels of interaction can provide critical lessons for how to approach, or not, the relationship between traffickers and rising vigilante groups that present a pressing challenge to the current administration.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE AND NARCO-TRAFFICKERS

Mexico has a long history of its police forces and military colluding with drug traffickers, irrespective of the party in power, dating back to at least the late

19th century when marijuana and opium smuggling across the US–Mexico border became entrenched.³⁶ Strong ties between the security forces across all three levels of government — local, state, and federal — and the narco-traffickers were prevalent during the continuous 71 year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), as well as during the 12 year experiment with democracy under the National Action Party (PAN), one of PRI's two main political rivals.

The consolidation of Mexican drug cartels took place gradually in the 1970s and 1980s under the watch of the PRI. With the silent approval of the political class, police forces, and the military, the loosely structured family-based networks of border smugglers — forerunners of today's traffickers — started to coalesce and gain organizational cohesion along hierarchical lines.

In this time period, despite the collusion between the traffickers and the state, the state maintained a strong-hand approach when it came to managing the cartels and the extent of their activities. State officials informally divided the areas where the cartels could operate, and were taking a cut of the profits the cartels were making.³⁷ This approach trans-

lated into low levels of violence in the country, and when such violence took place, it was mainly confined to settling of accounts among the narcos with few, if any, civilian victims.

In addition, from time to time, the state security forces would arrest low ranking traffickers who had fallen out of favor with the government official charged with controlling a specific area of operations. Such actions had a twofold purpose: on the one hand, the Mexican government kept the narcos in line and made sure that they would not engage in violent rampages as would happen later under the Calderón administration. On the other, the Mexican government would use the arrests for cosmetic purposes to show results in the fight against narco-trafficking.

Although in the 1970s and 1980s the Mexican underworld was not particularly well-structured, the family-based alliances among the narco-traffickers themselves were relatively durable and provided a degree of stability and cohesiveness to the environment. The individual ability of state security agencies and criminal organizations to coordinate with their peers also facilitated the coordination between the “upper-world” and the “underworld.” Both environments interpenetrated, and once decisions were agreed upon at the top, it was easier to implement them down the chain of command and keep the tap on potential violence outbreaks.

36 Astorga Almanza, L. A. (2005). *El siglo de las drogas : el narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio*. México, D.F., Plaza y Janés.

37 Stanley A. Pimentel, “Mexico’s Legacy of Corruption,” in *Menace to Society: Political-Criminal Collaboration Around the World*. Roy Godson. 2003.

Hence, in the first stages of the formation of Mexican cartels, the balance of power was tilted in favor of the state, with the narco-traffickers being mostly subservient to the interests and fads of corrupt officials across municipal, state, and federal levels. Over time, the situation deteriorated due to the cumulative effect of state corruption, while the profile of the drug cartels rose with their involvement in the cocaine trade. Ultimately, in the 1990s, with the fall of Medellín and Cali cartels, the Mexicans took over the business from the Colombians.

This empowered a number of criminal groups, while making the underworld environment more fragmented and competitive. Because of the divisions starting to take place, it became very important for drug cartels to gain reliable allies among state officials. The corruption of various government officials across all three levels of government continued, with the corruption patterns mirroring the divisions and alliances in the underworld.

Starting with the Fox administration in December 2000, the full opening of the political system created a more complex environment in which coordinated action across jurisdictions and levels of government became increasingly difficult. Also, the advent of free elections introduced a high level of insecurity for the narco-traffickers who could no longer rely on their old corrupt allies in government. Instead of simply brib-

ing the new officials and vaguely airing the well-known threat “*plata o plomo*”³⁸ (silver or lead) as they did in the past, the traffickers increasingly enforced the “*plomo*,” or “lead,” side of the threat to force the remaining officials into compliance, and make them less inclined to engage in any major operations against the narcos.

When Felipe Calderón came to power in December 2006, the balance of power had shifted significantly in favor of the drug cartels at the expense of the state. Thus, his administration enacted measures to shift the balance once again in favor of the state.

Once Calderón declared war on narco-traffickers and their associates, the conflict directly implicated the corrupt elements in the government on the payroll of the narcos. If previously fighting narco-trafficking was a matter of “fighting the narcos on the streets” and in courts (when this was the case), under Calderón the conflict reached deeply into the “security body” of the state. Under this analogy, one element of the body — the federal forces — was fighting other parts of the same body — the municipal and state forces — which were perceived as “cancerous cells” that needed to be eliminated. Consequently, a competition for survival emerged within the bureaucracy, and in the in-

38 “*Plata o plomo*” translates as “silver or lead” and has the meaning “accept the bribe or take the bullet.”

terest of self-preservation, corrupt participants systematically undermined the efforts of federal forces to eradicate the cartels.³⁹ By the end of his term, Calderón did not succeed in shifting the balance of power back into the government's favor, and corrupt government officials and police were acting as *de facto* proxies on behalf of the cartels in their battle against the state.

CARTEL-LEVEL IMPACT OF THE KINGPIN STRATEGY UNDER CALDERÓN

Although the Mexican state has not regained control over the cartels, the security reforms enacted by the Calderón administration, especially the kingpin strategy, have indeed fragmented the Mexican underworld and have disrupted the existing equilibria among the drug cartels and their allies. The arrest, extradition, or assassination of cartel leaders (often referred to as *capos*) by government forces weakened the cartels, but did not fully eradicate them. The implementation of this security measure with insufficient financial and military resources, inadequately trained forces — many of them still deeply plagued by corruption — while casting a wide net to simultaneously “catch” as many “cartel fishes” as possible, did not cripple the cartels as meaningfully as the govern-

ment intended. On the contrary, it only started a vicious circle of violence that made the use of proxies (or allies chosen from among street gangs and less powerful cartels) an increasingly favored tactic and caused reconfigurations in alliances based on the shifts in the balance of power among the groups.

To start, at group level, the decapitation of cartel leadership had two major impacts: internal and external to the organization.

INTRA-GROUP IMPACT OF THE KINGPIN STRATEGY

At the internal level, the arrest or killing of a capo often led to struggles for power over who would assume the reins of the cartel. Such struggles resulted in most cases in the cartel splitting into factions engaged in a bloody and protracted fight for the control of the *plazas* or trafficking routes of which the original cartel had been in charge.

The internal divisions within a criminal organization have had repercussions beyond control of territory. They equally had an impact on the police forces and government officials on the payroll of the initial organization, who were compelled to take sides in the new reconfiguration of cartel forces on the ground. Unfortunately, a number of such officials were swiftly assassinated and did not get the chance to join one faction or the other.

³⁹ “Fixing Mexico police becomes a priority,” by Ken Ellingwood, Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/la-fg-mexico-police17-2009nov17,0,6284386.story#axzz2ysMWAgmP>

For instance, upon the arrest in October 2008 of Eduardo Arellano Felix, the capo of the Arellano Felix Organization (AFO) or Tijuana cartel,⁴⁰ the cartel split into two factions. Luis Fernando Sanchez Arellano, the nephew of Eduardo, assumed the leadership of the main faction and continued the tradition of the cartel's leadership staying within the Arellano family. Contesting this tradition and perceiving Luis Fernando as inept for assuming the reins of the group, Teodoro Garcia Simental with a number of followers broke away from AFO and created the so-called "Teo Faction." This resulted in a savage, extremely bloody, and protracted fight for the cartel's leadership and control of trafficking routes. The levels of violence soared in Tijuana from 206 homicides in 2007 to over 1,200⁴¹ in 2010 when "El Teo" was arrested⁴² and his faction disbanded.

Similarly, the so-called assassination⁴³

40 "Mexico arrests alleged Arellano Felix member," CNN, October 26, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/10/26/mexico.cartel.arrest/>

41 Based on INEGI and SESNSP data.

42 "Mexican drug lord Teodoro Garcia Simental, known for his savagery, is captured," by Richard Marosi and Ken Ellingwood, Los Angeles Times, January 13, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jan/13/world/la-fg-mexico-arrest13-2010jan13>

43 This March 2014, Mexican authorities reported the killing of Nazario Moreno Gonzalez who was believed to have been already killed in a shoot out with police at the end of 2009. His body was never found at the time. "Long dead' Mexico drug lord Nazario Moreno killed," BBC, March 9, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-26510643>

"Another major consequence of internal divisions is related to the fact that the weaker side—most often the breakaway faction—often ends up forming an alliance with the rivals of the main cartel, acting as a proxy for them in the ongoing conflict between the two parties."

in December 2009 by government forces of Nazario "El Mas Loco" Moreno González, the capo of La Familia Michoacana (LFM), led to the split of LFM and rise of the Knights Templar in 2010, translating into higher levels of violence across the state of Michoacán.⁴⁴

Another major consequence of internal divisions is related to the fact that the weaker side — most often the breakaway faction — often ends up forming an alliance with the rivals of the main cartel, acting as a proxy for them in the ongoing conflict between the two par-

44 "Crusaders of Meth: Mexico's Deadly Knights Templar," by Ioan Grillo, Time Magazine, June 23, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2079430,00.html>

ties. In this vein, the so-called Teo faction joined the Sinaloa cartel, became its proxy and continued to fight the AFO in this capacity,⁴⁵ in the long-standing confrontation in which the two major cartels engaged for the control of the Tijuana *plaza* (or drug trafficking corridor) since the early 1990s.

As the previous example illustrates, the kingpin strategy has also pushed the weakened cartels to increasingly rely on the use of relatively weaker criminal groups, as well as street and prison gangs, as proxies in the fight against their rivals and the state. This asymmetry in the balance of power allows the stronger party more autonomy and flexibility in the decision making process while benefiting from the muscle and manpower provided by the breakaway faction or gang to increase its security and financial gains, which contribute not only to the cartel's survival, but also its prosperity. In turn, the breakaway faction or gang gains access to weapons, illegal merchandise, and the ability to operate in areas where it would not be able on its own. The proxy criminal group is also more likely to gain visibility and prestige in the underworld and the opportunity to establish dominance over its own rivals.

⁴⁵ "The Double-Edged Sword of a Mexican Drug Lord's Arrest," by Sylvia Longmire, HSToday.US, September 15, 2011, <http://www.hstoday.us/briefings/correspondents-watch/single-article/the-double-edged-sword-of-a-mexican-drug-lord-s-arrest/ab079232eaf94e33cbb4222c0ee1eb54.html>

INTER-GROUP IMPACT OF THE KINGPIN STRATEGY

On an external level, the government's weakening of narco-trafficking organizations led old allies to turn on each other and fight former allies to gain access to plazas and new trafficking corridors. The Sinaloa cartel has always had a very acute sense of the weakness of its both rivals and allies, and tries to exploit to its advantage the arrest or assassination of the other capos.

The evolution of the relationship between the Sinaloa, Gulf, and Juarez cartels is illustrative of these evolving alliance dynamics. Although they shift at a rapid pace, the alliances the cartels enter are not as random as portrayed in many journalistic accounts, but have the clear purpose of meeting the survival, security, and business needs of each organization.

Allies in the early 2000s,⁴⁶ the Juarez and Sinaloa cartels ended up engaging in a protracted proxy war in 2008. The Juarez cartel was in decline since 1997 when the leadership passed into the hands of Vicente Carrillo Fuentes at the death of his brother Amado during a botched plastic surgery that many speculate was aimed to change his ap-

⁴⁶ Profile of Juarez Cartel, Insight Crime, June 12, 2013, available at <http://www.insight-crime.org/profile-groups-mexico/juarez-cartel-mexico>

pearance.⁴⁷ With the weakening of the Juarez cartel, some key members defected to Sinaloa,⁴⁸ changing gradually the nature of the alliance between the groups. War broke out between the two organizations in 2004 when Rodolfo Carrillo Fuentes, the brother of the cartel's leader, was murdered at the orders of Sinaloa's leadership.⁴⁹

At the same time when Sinaloa was exploiting the weakening of their Juarez allies and trying to progressively take control of their trafficking routes, they also opened a second front and started to fight their Gulf Cartel rivals. The arrest in 2003 of Osiel Cardenas Guillen,⁵⁰ the leader of the Gulf Cartel,⁵¹ provided Sinaloa with the opportunity they were awaiting to contest the Gulf Cartel's domination of the Nuevo Laredo trafficking route, the busiest crossing

point for trucks into and out of the US.⁵² Hence, the number of intentional homicides rose across the state of Tamaulipas — the headquarters of the Gulf Cartel — from 184 in 2002 to 346 in 2006.⁵³

The opening of this second front resulted in a temporary standstill in 2005 and 2006 in the fight with the Juarez cartel,⁵⁴ but the violent conflict was revamped soon afterwards in 2008⁵⁵ with the two sides using street and prisons gangs such as Barrio Azteca (a Juarez Cartel ally and proxy), and Los Mexicles and Los Artistas Asesinos (Sinaloa Cartel allies and proxies) to carry out the confrontation.⁵⁶

The Sinaloa–Gulf Cartel confrontation together with the 2007 extradition to the US of Cardenas Guillen further weakened his organization.

47 “Mexico Captures Suspected Leader Of Juarez Drug Cartel,” Latino Fox News, September 2, 2013, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2013/09/02/mexican-police-capture-juarez-cartel-leader/>

48 “TCO 101: The Juarez Cartel,” by Sylvia Longmire at “Mexico's Drug War,” <http://www.mexicosdrugwar.com/dto-101-the-juarez-cartel.html>

49 Profile of Sinaloa Cartel, Insight Crime, January 26, 2014, available at <http://m.insight-crime.org/pages/article/4708>

50 “Captured: Mexican Cartel Boss Osiel Cardenas-Guillen Violent Criminal had Threatened Federal Agents,” Drug Enforcement Administration Press Release, March 21, 2003, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr032103.html>

51 The Gulf Cartel's main area of operations has been in the state of Tamaulipas and along Mexico's Gulf coast.

52 “The Real ‘El Chapo,’” Security Weekly Report, Stratfor, November 1, 2012, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/real-el-chapo>

53 According to data reported by SESNSP for the state of Tamaulipas for the years 1997 to 2014.

54 “TCO 101: The Juarez Cartel,” by Sylvia Longmire at “Mexico's Drug War,” <http://www.mexicosdrugwar.com/dto-101-the-juarez-cartel.html>

55 “How Juarez's Police, Politicians Picked Winners of Gang War,” by Steven Dudley, Insight Crime, February 13, 2013, <http://www.insight-crime.org/juarez-war-stability-and-the-future/juarez-police-politicians-picked-winners-gang-war>

56 “Barrio Azteca Gang Poised for Leap into International Drug Trade,” by Steven Dudley, Insight Crime, February 13, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/juarez-war-stability-and-the-future/barrio-azteca-gang-poised-leap>

This weakening allowed Los Zetas,⁵⁷ a criminal group associated with the Gulf Cartel and acting as its armed wing and proxy, more freedom of movement when setting up its own operations and carrying out independent illicit activities.⁵⁸ Ultimately, in early 2010 with Los Zetas gaining sufficient financial and military resources, the power gap with the Gulf Cartel narrowed enough for Los Zetas to break all previous agreements and cooperation with the cartel, turning into their avowed rivals.⁵⁹ With Los Zetas contesting the Gulf Cartel's territory, intentional homicides in Tamaulipas rose to 721 in 2010 and 1016 in 2012.⁶⁰

The irony of the situation is that the weakening of the Gulf Cartel in its conflict with Sinaloa allowed the rise

of Los Zetas who, starting in 2010, engaged in a rapid territorial expansion challenging not only their formal Gulf Cartel ally but also the territorial control exerted by Sinaloa throughout key regions of the country. The confrontation between Los Zetas and Sinaloa continues today, and has led to the formation of two major alliance blocs headed by these two groups, with the Gulf Cartel joining their former Sinaloa rivals in the fight against Los Zetas.⁶¹

As the examples above show, the Mexican drug cartels have always exploited the weakening of rivals at key moments such as power transitions in the wake of the arrest, extradition, or death of a capo. Unfortunately, the kingpin strategy implemented by Calderón only exacerbated these existing tendencies on the ground. This strategy sped up the tempo of the infighting among the cartels and of the shifts in alliances. The demise of old allies or their turning into enemies put additional pressure on the cartels to find new partners and form new alliances. At the same time, in the environment of anomie prevailing in the country, the choice of partners often did not fully meet the capability needs of the groups, and was constrained by the proximity, availability, and capability of allies on the ground.

57 Los Zetas were an initial group of 31 former Special Forces soldiers belonging to the Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (or *GAFEs*) who left in 1999 the military to become enforcers for Osiel Cardenas Guillen, the new leader of the Gulf Cartel. Grayson, G. W. and S. Logan (2012). *The executioner's men: Los Zetas, rogue soldiers, criminal entrepreneurs, and the shadow state they created*. New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers.

58 "Los Zetas: Evolution of a Criminal Organization," by Samuel Logan, *The International Relations and Security Network*, ETH Zurich, March 11, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=97554>

59 "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel," by Samuel Logan, February 16, 2012, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-profile-of-los-zetas-mexicos-second-most-powerful-drug-cartel>

60 According to data reported by SESNSP for the state of Tamaulipas for the years 1997 to 2014.

61 "Mexico and the Cartel Wars in 2010," *Stratfor, Security Weekly Report*, December 16, 2010, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20101215-mexico-and-cartel-wars-2010>

THE DYNAMICS OF ALLIANCES AMONG THE DRUG CARTELS AND THEIR PROXIES

The internal fragmentation of drug trafficking organizations and the breakdowns in existing alliances rendered the underworld even more competitive,⁶² with violence becoming a ubiquitous arrow in the cartels' quiver. The competition for power — under the guise of either rivalries over cartel leadership or control over the rivals' territory and the takeover of their operations — was settled in most cases through the indiscriminate use of violence against the rival cartel members, their associates, friends and family, corrupt officials on their payroll, and innocent civilians merely suspected of having ties to the rival organization.⁶³

In this environment even the appearance of law and order vanished, and the government's efforts to provide security only added to the climate of insecurity and violence. This breakdown in equilibrium at both state and underworld level raised the stakes of cooperation among narco-traffickers.

62 Snyder R, Duran-Martinez A (2009) "Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets." *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 52:253–273

63 "Man, The State and War Against Drug Cartels: A Typology of Drug-Related Violence in Mexico," Irina Chindea, *Small Wars Journal*, March 19, 2014, http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/man-the-state-and-war-against-drug-cartels-a-typology-of-drug-related-violence-in-mexico#_edn7

On the one hand, given the instability of the environment and weakening of major players, the cartels now more than ever need reliable allies who can contribute capabilities to the fight against rival cartels and the state. On the other hand, the climate of distrust and insecurity makes the formation of durable and stable alliances rather problematic and not easy to achieve.

The pressure from the state and from cartel rivals, business needs, as well as the cold-blooded pragmatism that is the hallmark of most leaders of criminal organizations, has led them to enter swiftly into new alliances to balance against threats to their survival⁶⁴ and to bandwagon for profit.⁶⁵ Most such cooperation agreements have been condemned to failure from the start because they are not rooted in a natural convergence of goals or compatibility in *modus operandi* between the allies, nor are they based on long-term calculations going beyond mere immediate survival.

The breakdown in law and order across Mexico under Calderón allows us to draw parallels between the anarchic international system in which states operate and the similarly anarchic underworld environment in which the

64 Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

65 "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," by Randall L. Schweller, *International Security* Volume 19, Number 1, Summer 1994, pp. 72-107 |

cartels interact with one another with no overarching enforcer of rules. In a similar fashion, the drug cartels “act in their own interest and (...) employ force to achieve their objectives.”⁶⁶ Thus, the exacerbation of violence in the context of the security measures undertaken by the Mexican government only highlighted the importance for the cartels to enter military alliances⁶⁷ motivated by security and survival.

As opposed to alliances among states though, the agreements the criminal groups reach are rarely written and there is no broadly accepted regulatory body that can enforce these agreements and punish defection. The underworld in which the cartels operate is close to the Hobbesian state of nature with no Leviathan present. While in the international system states have attempted to find ways to reduce the impact of anarchy, the environment of cartel interactions finds itself in an exemplary state of nature where anarchy prevails. Therefore, in the absence of an overarching supervising authority, the threat of violence to punish defections from cooperation is what makes alliances binding and gives

them a degree of formality and legitimacy among the criminal parties.

The analogy with the behavior of states in the international system can be further strengthened by the observation that criminal groups are units who, just like the state, are motivated by survival, control of territory, and claim monopoly over the use of violence in the areas where they are present. Additionally, the similarities between the anarchical international system and the anarchical underworld of violent non-state actors facilitate the analogy between alliance formation at state level and among criminal groups. Similarly to alliances among states, alliances among criminal organizations are meant to be a force multiplier, enhancing the capacity of the actors to carry out their purported mission (capability aggregation model) and these alliances represent only a means towards an end, and not an end in itself.

Comparably to states, the drug cartels enter alliances to balance against a rising cartel power that might disturb the existing distribution of forces⁶⁸ in the underworld, or to balance against the threat posed by one of the criminal organizations in the system.⁶⁹ The Gulf Cartel joined the Sinaloa alliance bloc for exactly this reason—to balance against the rising threat and violence in which Los

⁶⁶ Hall, R. B. and T. J. Biersteker (2002). *The emergence of private authority in global governance*. Cambridge, UK; New York, Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁷ The cartels enter alliances with one another to build up their security and to defeat their opponents militarily just as states do in the international system – they enter *military alliances* to fight wars against their enemies and ensure their own survival.

⁶⁸ Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Boston, Mass., McGraw-Hill.

⁶⁹ Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Zetas have engaged throughout Mexico since early 2010. On the other side of the equation, the AFO, the Juárez cartel, and remnants of the Beltrán Leyva organization have joined Los Zetas alliance bloc to balance against the threat posed by Sinaloa⁷⁰ to their control of trafficking routes, border crossing points and ultimately, to their own survival.

While entering alliances for security reasons and for seeking self-preservation has been at the top of the list of cartel priorities, another aspect of the cooperation among them is that a balance-of-interests approach may also prevail, especially given the for-profit orientation of these non-state entities. A balance-of-interests perspective predicts that conflict will be more resorted to when there is widespread dissatisfaction among the actors in the system.⁷¹ The pressure the Calderón administration put on the drug cartels created such widespread dissatisfaction and raised the likelihood of cartels resorting to violence to settle the accounts among them. Additionally, the use of proxies and the corresponding formation of asymmetric alliances with

"The cooperation of major cartels with breakaway factions, gangs, or with significantly weaker cartels illustrates how the balance of power—or the power differential—between two parties influences the likelihood of cooperation or conflict between them. The greater the asymmetry between two groups, the more likely they are to cooperate and form a durable alliance. As the power differential between two groups narrows, the probability of a breakdown in cooperation and of conflict outbreak between them increases."

⁷⁰ "Profiles of Mexico's Seven Major Drug Trafficking Organizations," by Peter Chalk, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point website, January 18, 2012, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/profiles-of-mexicos-seven-major-drug-trafficking-organizations>

⁷¹ "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," by Randall L. Schweller, International Security Volume 19, Number 1, Summer 1994, pp. 72-107 |

street and prison gangs only furthered the interests of both cartels and their weaker counterparts.

Allies on the ground consist of crimi-



nal groups of different sizes, with various propensities for violence and with varying sets of skills. In most cases these groups have been willing to enter new inter-cartel alliances and help reconfigure old ones. This availability and willingness of cartels and smaller criminal groups to ally has allowed the violence to continue unabated.

Many of the interactions and relationships existent among criminal groups present a power differential. In very few dyadic relationships the parties are in symmetrical power positions towards one another. The cooperation of major cartels with breakaway factions, gangs, or with significantly weaker cartels illustrates how the balance of power — or the power differential — between two parties influences the likelihood of cooperation or conflict between them. The greater the asymmetry between two groups, the more likely they are to cooperate and form a durable alliance. As the

power differential between two groups narrows, the probability of a breakdown in cooperation and of conflict outbreak between them increases.

In contrast, in some cases criminal groups with narrow power differential between them are more likely to form a non-aggression pact, or, when the stakes are high, they are more likely to engage in a protracted conflict with one another. These dynamics will be illustrated below in a discussion of the use of proxies in the confrontations between the Sinaloa and its rivals, the AFO and Juarez cartel, as well as the break-up between Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel.

The use of street gangs as cartel proxies is not new. It dates back to the early 1990s when the Sinaloa cartel aimed to take away the control of the Tijuana plaza from the Arellano Felix family and sent its operatives in their territory. In response to this encroachment on

their turf, the Arellano family tortured and killed the Sinaloa operatives, and attempted to kill “El Chapo” Guzman himself, the capo of the Sinaloa cartel. In a typical scenario of settling of accounts in the underworld, El Chapo retaliated against the Arellano brothers and attempted to assassinate them in 1992 in a nightclub in Puerto Vallarta.⁷² This episode opened a Pandora’s Box. It marked the beginning of the war among the Mexican drug cartels and their use of proxies to wage their battles.

In the Puerto Vallarta assassination attempt, David “D” Barron, a member of the San Diego Logan Heights gang and of the Mexican Mafia prison gang, saved the lives of two Arellano brothers, and became their close associate. In this way, Barron and his gang became the enforcement arm of the AFO and acted as its proxy against AFO’s challengers.⁷³ In May 1993, Barron and his gang attempted to murder El Chapo at Guadalajara’s airport, but ended up killing the Roman Catholic Cardinal Juan Jesus Cardinal Posadas Ocampo.⁷⁴ The assassination of

the Cardinal raised many eyebrows and lent itself to speculations, including that he might have been deliberately murdered for voicing his concerns regarding the rise in drug trafficking throughout the country. Irrespective of whether Barron’s gang was targeting El Chapo or the Cardinal, this episode as well as their attempt in 1997 on the life of Jesus Blancornelas, the editor of Tijuana weekly magazine *Zeta*,⁷⁵ illustrate the consistent use over time of gangs as proxies on behalf of the drug cartels. Together with carrying out enforcement operations for the cartels, the gangs also engaged in the traffic of drugs over the border and their distribution at street level into the US.⁷⁶

At later stages of the conflict, the subsequent use by Sinaloa of the Teo faction as its proxy to defeat the AFO, and the non-aggression pact the two organizations reached when it became obvious no clear victory was in sight, shows how interrelated are the internal and external dynamics at play among the groups operating in the underworld. The weakening of a group due to internal splits does not end with the partial loss of manpower and capabilities. Often, the breakaway faction aggregates capabili-

72 “The Real ‘El Chapo,’” Security Weekly Report by Stratfor, November 1, 2012, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/real-el-chapo>

73 “Mexican Traffickers Recruiting Killers in the US,” by Sam Dillon, The New York Times, December 4, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/04/world/mexican-traffickers-recruiting-killers-in-the-us.html>

74 “Cardinal in Mexico Killed in a Shooting Tied to Drug Battle,” by Tim Golden, The New York Times, May 25, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/25/world/cardinal-in-mexico-killed-in-a-shooting-tied-to-drug-battle.html>

75 “Mexican Traffickers Recruiting Killers in the US,” by Sam Dillon, The New York Times, December 4, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/04/world/mexican-traffickers-recruiting-killers-in-the-us.html>

76 Author’s interview with Steve Duncan, San Diego, June 2012.

ties with the group's main rival further contributing to its weakening.

The narrow balance of power between the Sinaloa cartel and AFO and its allies contributed to the protraction of the conflict. The bloody fight among the cartels lasted until they exhausted each other, suffered significant human and financial losses, and finally recognized that there were little to no marginal benefits from continuing the fight. A similar scenario was at play in Ciudad Juarez in the confrontation between the Juarez cartel and Sinaloa for the control of territories and border crossings into the US controlled by the former.

After the murder of Rodolfo Carrillo Fuentes at the orders of El Chapo Guzman in 2004, the Juarez cartel retaliated in a classic organized crime style by assassinating El Chapo's brother, Arturo, in jail. After a period of respite in which Sinaloa fought for territory control with the Gulf Cartel, the violent confrontation with the Juarez cartel picked up again in early 2008. The narrow power differential between the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels combined with their use of street and prison gangs to fight their wars on the streets of Ciudad Juarez led to an abominable rise in violence in the city — from 189 intentional homicides recorded for 2007 to 3,589 in 2010,⁷⁷ — transforming it into the most violent city in the world for three consecutive years starting with 2008.

In this case, the power differential played a twofold role. Both cartels were able to use the asymmetry in power between each of them and the local gangs to forge stable alliances with groups such as Barrio Azteca, Los Mexicles, and Artistas Asesinos (the most representative groups on the ground, given that Ciudad Juarez has over 900 such criminal groups operating in its underworld).⁷⁸ These asymmetric alliances allowed the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels to increase their capabilities and maintain throughout a good portion of the conflict a narrow power differential between them that protracted the fight.

The violence subsided with the decline of La Linea (the enforcement arm of the Juarez Cartel)⁷⁹ and the weakening of their gang allies, leading to a widening in the power differential between the two groups, and subsequently to a victory for El Chapo Guzman. Moreover, the presence of the army in the area put additional pressure on both groups. Last but not least, the power differential grew even larger when the Juarez cartel lost its “guarantors” or protectors⁸⁰

78 “How Juarez’s Police, Politicians Picked Winners of Gang War,” by Steven Dudley, Insight Crime, February 13, 2013, <http://www.insight-crime.org/juarez-war-stability-and-the-future/juarez-police-politicians-picked-winners-gang-war>

79 “Arrests Herald Juarez Drug Gang’s Decline,” by Patrick Corcoran, Insight Crime, June 23, 2011, available at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/arrests-herald-juarez-drug-gangs-decline>

80 “How Juarez’s Police, Politicians Picked

77 Source: Based on INEGI and SESNSP data.

among municipal and state level security and government officials as a consequence of the security reform measures or of their assassination by Sinaloa cartel affiliates.

The evolution of the Gulf Cartel–Los Zetas interaction is equally telling of the power and alliance dynamics at play in the Mexican underworld. When Los Zetas was formed in 1999 as a paramilitary group to provide protection for the Gulf Cartel,⁸¹ the asymmetry in capabilities allowed the two groups to enter a stable and durable alliance. As Los Zetas were delegated more responsibilities, they ended up “creating their own routes to and from the United States and developing their own access to cocaine sources in South America.”⁸² Consequently, the gap in capabilities with the Gulf Cartel narrowed, resulting in Los Zetas splitting with the cartel in early 2010, and joining the rival alliance bloc. Furthermore, in the past few years, the ever expanding Los Zetas started to use US-based street gangs as enforcers to move drugs into the US, coordinate their distribution at street level, and protect the return of drug proceeds across the border into Mexico.⁸³

Besides the stability of the alliance, the choice to enter alliances in which there is a significant gap in relative power between the two parties provides the major player with a higher degree of control over operations, and ultimately outcomes, than what it would have had in more symmetric power alliances.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Cooperation allows criminal groups to pool their capabilities and skills, extend their reach beyond national borders, receive rewards from cooperation that exceed the satisfaction of interest through unilateral action and competition,⁸⁵ and challenge state authority in ways that would not be possible through individual enterprise. Accordingly, the study of their alliances and interactions with proxy criminal groups contributes to the understanding of one functioning mechanism through which a sub-category of violent non-state actors has an impact on outcomes at the local, regional, transnational, and international level.

Winners of Gang War,” by Steven Dudley, *Insight Crime*, February 13, 2013.

81 Manwaring, M. (2009). A “New” Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment: The Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

82 Ibid.

83 “A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico’s Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel,” by Samuel Logan,

February 16, 2012, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-profile-of-los-zetas-mexicos-second-most-powerful-drug-cartel>

84 Morrow, J. D. (1991). “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances.” *American Journal of Political Science* 35(4): 904-933.

85 Dougherty, J. E. and R. L. Pfaltzgraff (2001). *Contending theories of international relations : a comprehensive survey*. New York, Longman.

Additionally, the way in which the policy and academic communities conceptualize this issue is likely to have an impact on the measures that policy makers adopt and the resources they allocate to address the problem. To the present, the violence in Mexico has not been approached from the perspective of shifting alliances among cartels and their proxies, but mostly from the standpoint of criminal violence. Thus, lessons from the use of criminal groups as proxies to fight internal conflicts can teach us how to better approach the violence in Mexico — and other similar contexts — and come up with viable and implementable solutions.

The Mexican government aimed to fragment the underworld and attempted to destabilize the existing alliances among the major trafficking organizations, but it did not take into account the rise in second and third order effects, such as the increasing use of proxies and recent rise in self-defense forces. The concurrent and ill-timed implementation of security reforms and cartel decapitation strategies with insufficient resources and inadequately trained personnel backfired, resulting in a fragmentation of the underworld, increasing competition for territory among the cartels, sharp reconfigurations in their alliances and, ultimately, soaring violence throughout the country.

The asymmetry in power between the cartels and street gangs or cartel breakaway factions provided the narcos with access to a significant and steady source of manpower.

The resulting proxy-alliances proved to be rather stable, allowing the major cartels to supplement their war-fighting capabilities and maintain a narrow power differential with their rivals, protracting the internal conflict in Mexico. The persistence of the cartel-proxy relationship together with the shifts in alliances among the main drug cartels undercut the efforts of the Mexican state to impose law and order in the country, and perpetrated the vicious cycle of violence in the areas disputed by the cartels.

There are several lessons to be drawn from the failures of the security policies of the Calderón administration. The most prominent one is the importance of adequate timing and crafting the appropriate sequencing for implementation of security measures to avoid chasing too many security targets at the same time and spreading too thin already scarce government resources.


Next, the Mexican government needs to increase security at local levels when taking down the cartel leadership so that the government has control over the territories where violence is likely to erupt in the aftermath of cartel decapitation. Additionally, it is important that the Mexican government keep high levels of kinetic pressure on the cartels and their potential allies to make more difficult the physical reconfiguration of alliances and prevent them from aggregating capabilities and maintaining a narrow power gap that would protract the violent con-

flict. Moreover, through well-targeted information operations, the Mexican government should aim to have an impact on lowering the levels of trust among parties to render more arduous the alliance formation process and debilitate the already existing alliances.

Besides the crafting and implementation of security measures directly targeting the cartels and their allied proxies, grass-roots measures dedicated to improving education and economic conditions throughout the country are necessary so that more young Mexicans find opportunities performing legitimate and legal economic activities. The Peña Nieto Administration started its mandate with a series of measures in this direction, but such measures should address more specifically at the community level the rising problem of youth gangs, a phenomenon little acknowledged in Mexico where it is perceived mainly to be a US problem.

Such lessons and recommendation are particularly pertinent in the context of the increasing *vigilantismo* in Mexico over the past year, and of speculations that the self-defense forces have been infiltrated by criminal organizations using them as proxies in the fight against their rivals. A tighter cooperation at community level among the local population, a well-trained gendarmerie force educated in the protection of human rights, and non-governmental organizations dedicated to gang-prevention activities among the youth should be encouraged.

This cooperative approach between federal sponsored security forces, civil society, and local communities should target the asymmetry of power and interests between sponsor criminal groups and the proxies they are likely to recruit from within the respective communities.

The aim of such a bottom-up approach, which takes into account the existing asymmetries between parties, is to exacerbate the incongruence in interest between sponsors and their existing or potential proxies, to deprive the sponsors of the muscle and manpower of their proxies, and raise the costs of cooperation for the smaller criminal entities so as to shift their incentive structure and render cooperation untenable. 

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