

THE OTHER WAR NEXT DOOR: VIOLENT CRIME IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE U.S. RESPONSE

By Ross Albert

John C. Whitehead School of Diplomacy & International Relations, Seton Hall University

Abstract

One of the defining characteristics of international politics and public diplomacy in the 21st century is the rapid growth of non-state actors. These non-state entities transcend borders and range from multinational corporations to non-governmental organizations and beyond. Transnational criminal organizations - a threatening breed of non-state actors - are increasingly common in today's international landscape. Their presence is especially forceful and troublesome within and among the small states of Central America. These organizations are interested in the pursuit of wealth and violence as a means to achieve rather than an end in itself. This paper seeks to explore transnational organized crime in Central America and the United States' efforts to combat the staggering rates of violence in the countries. Violent crime, mostly at the hands of powerful street and prison gangs, threatens to undermine already tenuous democratic stability in the countries of Central America. U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the region should focus their attention on these threats.

This essay proceeds in seven main sections. First, it provides a brief overview of the security challenges facing Central America's Northern Triangle today in the form of organized criminal gangs and drug cartels. Second, it explores the origins and growth of violent crime throughout the region. Next, it examines the current U.S. strategy to confront these threats. In this regard, close attention is paid to multilateral agreements such as the Mérida Initiative and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Fourth, it articulates the reasons to use a new approach and offers specific alternative policy proposals. Fifth, it addresses potential obstacles to the policy recommendations proposed in this paper, and the ways around those obstacles. Sixth, it explains why other proposals fail to provide viable solutions. Last, it concludes with a summation of the findings and thoughts on the future prospects for peace and security in the countries.

Key Words

Central America, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, cartels, drug trafficking, narcotics, organized crime, intelligence, security, development, rule of law, inter-agency collaboration

Persistent Violence

Most Americans are well aware of the ongoing drug war in Mexico and the horrific violence that has become almost commonplace just beyond their border. Images of Mexican drug cartels and the gruesome crimes they commit have been well-documented by the media. Less discussed is another bloody conflict taking place right next door in and among the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, together known as Central America's Northern Triangle. Central America was once considered a tropical paradise and a preferred tourist destination for

Escalating crime in Central America continues to pose a threat to regional stability. In this area, the security threats are multifaceted, as powerful street gangs and organized crime syndicates tied to drug cartels vie for influence. However, these countries lack the material resources and institutional capacity to effectively confront the alarming levels of violence.

The United States must act as a willing partner to develop effective policies that confront transnational crime. One of the principal reasons why the United States should concern itself is because it is part and parcel of the problem. As such, the United States has a "shared responsibility" in this conflict in two major ways. The first aspect involves U.S. deportation policies, which have directly affected and contributed to the steady rise of youth gangs. In many ways, the United States is responsible for sowing the seeds of organized crime and violence in the region. The most notorious gangs in Central America, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara or Barrio 18 (M-18), originated in Los Angeles in the 1980s.² Second, the United States' demand for illicit drugs fuels the continued supply from Latin America, thus contributing to drug-related violence in trans-shipment countries such as Guatemala and Honduras. Although United States cooperation with Central America on the security front has grown recently, mainly through joint military and law enforcement interdiction operations, the Central American community must redouble its efforts and seek new strategies. These include smarter policing, improved intelligence sharing, and community-based intervention and prevention programs.

Origins & Spread of Violent Crime

Gangs have been a steady force throughout Central America for several decades.³ According to a report by the Washington Office on Latin America, a U.S. non-governmental organization, "youth gangs have been documented as existing in Central America since at least the 1960s."⁴ The gangs have emerged from the cyclical forces of immigration and deportation. After the U.S. government enacted strict immigration laws in the early 1990s, many Central American immigrants were deported back to their countries of origin. The list of deportable crimes was greatly expanded to include minor offenses, such as drunken driving and petty theft. The deportees brought the gang culture of crime and lawlessness they developed in the urban ghettos of Los Angeles and other cities back with them, and the effects on their home countries have been devastating. Lainie Reisman notes that, "upon arrival in Central America, the deported youth often are quickly integrated into local MS-13 and 18th street cells, thus strengthening ties between these gangs in different countries."⁵ According to Cristina Eguizabal, an expert on U.S.-Latin American relations at Florida International University, an average of six people are murdered in Honduras daily, twelve in El Salvador, and fourteen in Guatemala.⁶ The death toll has been considerable, recording nearly 17,000 murders in the Northern Triangle in 2011.⁷ Northern Triangle countries, burdened by a shortage of resources and fragile governance, face a daunting task in trying to curtail the influence of powerful gangs.

While criminal gangs have existed for several decades in Central America, a more recent phenomenon is the presence of and associated violence brought by Mexican drug trafficking organizations, most notably the Zetas and their rival, the Sinaloa cartel. Northern Triangle countries have been directly affected by departing Mexican President Felipe Calderón's crackdown on the cartels roaming throughout his country. Facing mounting opposition from the Mexican authorities, the cartels have pushed south into Guatemala and Honduras. This is a trend sometimes referred to as the "cockroach effect," because displaced criminal networks from one region migrate to another in search of safer havens. The Mexican cartels have established a strong foothold along the border area and on Guatemala's Pacific coast. To address the problem, the Guatemalan government declared a siege in the northern province of Alta Verapaz in 2010, where Mexican drug traffickers had reportedly taken over large areas.⁸ It is now estimated that two-fifths of all murders in Guatemala are tied to the drug trade.⁹

¹ "The Drug War Hits Central America," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

² Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005: 6.

³ "Daring to Care: Community-Based Responses to Youth Gang Violence." Washington Office on Latin America, (2008): 29.

⁴ "Daring to Care: Community-Based Responses to Youth Gang Violence." Washington Office on Latin America, (2008): 29.

⁵ Lainie Reisman, "Breaking the Vicious Cycle: Responding to Central American Youth Gang Violence," *SAIS Review*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, no.26 (2006): 149.

⁶ Jorge I. Domínguez and Rafael Fernández de Castro, *Contemporary U.S.-Latin American Relations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 76.

⁷ Michael Shifter, "Countering Criminal Violence in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, no.64 (2012): 3.

⁸ Michael Shifter, "Central America's Security Predicament," *Current History*, no.110 (2011): p.51.

⁹ "Central America: The Tormented Isthmus," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

In addition to Guatemala, Honduras is also affected by drug traffickers. Indeed, it may be the Central American country most afflicted by the drug trade. Large, sparsely populated expanses of wilderness are conducive to transporting drugs northward. The recent discovery of a cocaine processing lab in a remote mountainous area demonstrates that it is no longer just a transit point for illicit drugs.¹⁰ Marlon Pascua, Honduras's defense secretary, articulated his country's struggles against the cartels when he stated, "This is David versus Goliath, and we are David fighting the giant."¹¹

U.S. Steps Up Aid

In the early 2000s, the United States mostly ignored the drug and gang violence taking place in Central America. In the latter half of the decade, the United States became more involved, at least recognizing that the deteriorating security situation warranted its attention. The Mérida Initiative, launched by Presidents Bush and Calderón in March 2007, is a regional security and counternarcotics cooperation plan. The initiative includes financial aid in the form of training, equipment, and technology for both Mexico and Central America. As part of the plan, \$165 million was earmarked for Central America in 2008 and 2009, and another \$100 million was allotted in 2010.¹² From the outset, Mexico has received the bulk of the funding (approximately 84 percent).¹³

The Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) followed on the heels of the Mérida Initiative. Four months after Mérida was initiated, Central American presidents asked for assistance for a regional security plan. The initiative was thus extended to the seven countries of Central America. The desired objective of the initiative is to simultaneously enhance citizen security while crippling the power of criminal organizations that threaten to destabilize local communities and governments. It prioritizes socioeconomic development, judicial reform, and better law enforcement capabilities.¹⁴ The aid package allocates \$301.5 million between 2010 and 2012. The Obama administration has requested an additional \$107.5 million for 2013.¹⁵ According to a recent report by the Brookings Institution, over two-thirds of the appropriated 2010 funds go toward improving police capabilities and judicial institutions.¹⁶

Calls and Proposals for Change

However, CARSI has failed to achieve lasting results, and a major factor is the funding. Financial aid to the Northern Triangle countries is significantly lower than the amount provided to Mexico, despite having the highest murder rates of any region in the world.¹⁷ Oscar Alvarez, Honduras's security minister, has referred to the amount of aid provided as "a drop in a bucket."¹⁸ Central America's governments are financially strapped and do not collect enough tax revenue to pay for programs that would address the worsening security situation.¹⁹ Average tax revenues in the region account for 17.2 percent of GDP, a lower threshold than found in sub-Saharan Africa. In Guatemala and El Salvador, tax intakes constitute 11.6 and 14.6 percent of GDP, respectively.²⁰

In Honduras, officials estimated that a radar system to monitor planes carrying drug cargo would cost \$30 million.²¹ As part of CARSI, Honduras was allocated roughly \$37 million over a three-year period (2008-2011), or \$12 million per year. Radar systems are just one of many needed resources, such as additional patrol boats, helicopters, and improved information technology.

Another problem with CARSI is its continued emphasis on hardline, repressive tactics in dealing with criminal gangs and transnational criminal networks. Past efforts to combat organized crime in the region have proved that strong-arm policies rarely work. This has been the case in Mexico, where cartels have retaliated against the government's crackdown on organized crime and, more recently, in the Northern Triangle countries. The increased use of the military to fight gangs has led to human rights abuses, such as torture, disappearances, and assassinations of common citizens in places like El Salvador.²² In essence, most of the programs and policies under CARSI are extensions of previously tried approaches, with few positive results.

There is no panacea to eliminating violence altogether in the region. Policy makers should start by focusing on achieving realistic and attainable goals—curbing the violence to more acceptable levels while simultaneously building up the capacity of their Central American counterparts to confront pressing threats on their own. To arrive at solutions on eradicating gang-related crime in the region, a strategy must be devised that combines elements of enforcement and prevention.

The author proposes two new policy prescriptions. First, more aid should be channeled to local and federal police forces. Central America's law enforcement agencies are outmanned and overmatched by powerful drug trafficking organizations and street gangs. Currently, Guatemala's police force numbers 25,500.²³ According to Carlos Menocal, the interior minister, this is less than half the number needed.²⁴ In San Pedro Sula, the second-largest and most violent city in Honduras, the police force numbers only 1,000 officers. The United Nations recommends that a city of that size have 4,000 officers.²⁵

Second, intelligence sharing on a transnational level must increase. There has yet to be a successful international apparatus that integrates and fuses information from U.S. law enforcement agencies and their Central American counterparts. The author proposes the creation of a transnational gang intelligence center for the purpose of coordinating and disseminating information between countries. This would be an effective mechanism for providing timely and accurate real-time intelligence feeds, thus enabling the authorities to apprehend gang leaders and criminals more easily. The organization must be staffed by carefully vetted personnel from all pertinent countries. Thus, public diplomacy efforts in the region could combine communications resources and legal expertise through the gang intelligence center.

Enforcement strategies must be complemented with prevention and intervention programs. In this regard, policy makers should consider two approaches. First, in order to make the most of limited resources, socioeconomic development efforts should target the most isolated and vulnerable communities in the Northern Triangle. It is useless and wasteful to take a blanket approach to the social ills that plague the region. As part of the strategy, governments should rely on data-driven research to help them analyze and assess which communities are most susceptible to gang violence. In most cases, vulnerable communities are those with an overwhelmingly young and underemployed population.

Second, following along the lines of the previous proposal, community-based responses to youth gang violence should be fostered and encouraged. These grassroots programs should be run by locals who know their communities and can build trust with marginalized youth. For example, in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, a violence reduction center supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provides marginalized youth with recreational outlets such as soccer fields and parks. These programs should be replicated throughout other parts of the country and the region. In this way, the person-to-person public diplomacy efforts of USAID could be scaled up to prevent crime more comprehensively. For example, prevention councils which convene local government, civil society, and youth leaders are an effective mechanism allowing for ordinary citizens to provide ideas in anticrime efforts.

¹⁰ Randal Archibold and Damien Cave, "Drug Wars Push Deeper into Central America," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2011.

¹¹ Randal Archibold and Damien Cave, "Drug Wars Push Deeper into Central America," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2011.

¹² Eric Olson, David Shirk, and Andrew Selee, "Shared Responsibility: U.S.-Mexico Policy Options For Confronting Organized Crime," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (October 2010): 9.

¹³ Jennifer Nerby and Lauren Mathae, "Drug Trafficking: Central America's Dark Shadow," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, (August 2011): 3.

¹⁴ Cynthia Arnsen and Eric Olson, "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (November 2011): 11.

¹⁵ Michael Shifter, "Countering Criminal Violence in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, no.64 (2012): 517.

¹⁶ Kevin Casas-Zamora, "Paying Attention to Central America's Drug Trafficking Crisis," The Brookings Institution, (October 2010): 2.

¹⁷ Michael Shifter, "Central America's Security Predicament," *Current History*, no.110 (2011): p.51.

¹⁸ "Central America: The Tormented Isthmus," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

¹⁹ "The Drug War Hits Central America," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

²⁰ Michael Shifter, "Countering Criminal Violence in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, no.64 (2012): 5.

²¹ Randal Archibold and Damien Cave, "Drug Wars Push Deeper into Central America," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2011.

²² Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005: 3.

²³ "Central America: The Tormented Isthmus," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

²⁴ "Central America: The Tormented Isthmus," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

²⁵ "Central America's bloody drug problem," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/19/world/americas/narco-wars-guatemala-honduras/index.html> (accessed September 21, 2012).

Overcoming Obstacles to the Plan

While the policy prescriptions presented in this paper are an improvement over existing U.S. strategies to confront security threats in the region, there are a few obstacles that need to be addressed.

One possible hindrance to the proposed strategy is the ongoing and persistent corruption within and among the police forces of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. However, professionalization of the police forces of Central America is under way.²⁶ Throughout the region, efforts are under way to improve recruitment, selection, and training of police officers, noted a recent report on the state of policing in Central America by The Washington Office on Latin America.²⁷

Some might argue that the proposed creation of a transnational intelligence organization will be hampered by political and institutional gridlock. In the past few years, however, there have been numerous examples of successful cross-border initiatives. The International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), initiated by the U.S. Justice Department, provides logistical support to El Salvador's national police.²⁸ As a result, says Ana Arana, an investigative journalist who has reported extensively on Latin America, "El Salvador is now the only country in the region with a working national emergency police response system, a computerized crime analysis and deployment network, and an intranet that connects the precincts internally."²⁹ Another positive transnational program is the Central American Integration System (SICA). "SICA has become an expression of Central America's united political will to resolve this crucial security issue," notes a report on the region's security challenges by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs.³⁰ In short, history demonstrates that leaders throughout the region and in the United States are willing to put aside their differences to come together to confront the mutual threats facing their nations.

Last, detractors may contend that social and economic development programs cannot quell the violence nor are they a substitute for law enforcement. There are a couple of rejoinders to these counterarguments. First, social intervention and prevention programs aim to prevent future violence by addressing the underlying causes of crime. Second, the author is not advocating sole reliance on a citizen-based approach. Rather, community involvement must operate simultaneously and in tandem with policing efforts.

Alternative Policies, Ineffective Solutions

One option, other than the presented proposals for dealing with violence in the region, would be to essentially maintain the status quo under CARSI. While progress has been made under CARSI, violence continues to rage onward, consistently placing Central American countries among the highest homicide rates in the world.³¹ El Salvador and Guatemala continue their efforts to stem the flow of criminal violence. Moreover, the provisions under CARSI do not extend far enough to reach the grassroots municipalities and towns in these battered countries. Another alternative is a targeted approach to curtailing youth gang violence. Proponents of this strategy argue that suppression efforts should be directed toward the most hardcore gang members. However, hardened gang members are unlikely to give up their criminal lifestyles. Finally, another alternative is to leave the countries of the Northern Triangle to their own devices. Advocates of this approach argue that serious and lasting reform can only come internally. This is undoubtedly true, but these are shared problems that require shared responsibilities. As mentioned previously in this essay, American deportation policies and demand for illicit drugs have contributed to the escalating violence; therefore, the United States must address this issue.

Final Reflections

Previous findings indicate that while U.S.-Central America security cooperation has ramped up within the past year or so, there is still significant room for growth. Organized crime in the form of transnational criminal networks and

drug trafficking organizations continues to wreak havoc in the region, threatening the fragile democratic peace in the Northern Triangle. Recent events signal that the United States is committed to maintaining a heavy-handed presence in the region. On May 11, 2011 a commando-style raid near the Honduran town of Ahuas involved scores of Drug Enforcement Administration agents. More recently, the United States has begun sending Marines to Guatemala to help combat Mexican cartels from operating freely throughout the country. These efforts should continue unabated, but should not be relied upon as the only methods of confronting crime in the region.

In summation, this essay has argued for a multifaceted approach to confronting the security challenges in the Northern Triangle. Any regional security plan must include elements of both enforcement and prevention. On the enforcement side, two primary changes have been proffered. First, increased funding should go toward helping Central American governments hire more policemen. A well-trained police force is a key element in controlling crime. Second, the United States should spearhead the creation of a transnational intelligence fusion center. As the new forms of violence evolve and become more complex, security forces will require more precise and timely information to respond immediately and effectively to threats. From a prevention standpoint, socioeconomic programs should target communities most at risk. While it is understood that violence is not confined to one area, local communities most susceptible to crime due to high levels of poverty, exclusion, and lack of opportunities should be given more support. Public diplomacy should expand to include technical, legal, and community-driven campaigns. In short, the United States can no longer ignore the violence and deeper problems of poverty, inequality, and ineffective governance in the region. Transnational organized crime is perhaps the greatest threat facing the hemisphere today, and continued cooperation between the U.S. and Central America is needed to meet the challenge.

Arana, Ana. "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005: 1-8.

Archibold, Randal and Damien Cave. "Drug Wars Push Deeper into Central America," *New York Times*, March 23, 2011.

Arnson, Cynthia and Eric Olson. "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (November 2011): 1-17.

Casas-Zamora, Kevin. "Paying Attention to Central America's Drug Trafficking Crisis," The Brookings Institution, (October 2010).

"Central America's bloody drug problem," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/19/world/americas/narco-wars-guatemala-honduras/index.html> (accessed September 21, 2012).

"Central America: The Tormented Isthmus," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.

"Daring to Care: Community-Based Responses to Youth Gang Violence." Washington Office on Latin America, (2008): 1-48.

Domínguez, Jorge I. and Rafael Fernández de Castro. *Contemporary U.S.-Latin American Relations: Cooperation or Conflict in the 21st Century?* New York and London: Routledge, 2010.

Farah, Douglas. "Organized Crime in El Salvador: Its Homegrown and Transnational Dimensions," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (November 2011): 104-138.

Nerby, Jennifer and Lauren Mathae. "Drug Trafficking: Central America's Dark Shadow," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, no. 31 (2011): 1-4.

Olson, Eric, Shirk, David and Andrew Selee. "Shared Responsibility: U.S.-Mexico Policy Options For Confronting Organized Crime," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (October 2010):1-31.

"Protect and Serve? The Status of Police Reform in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, (2009): 1-51.

26 "Protect and Serve? The Status of Police Reform in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, (2009): 41.

27 "Protect and Serve? The Status of Police Reform in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, (2009): 10.

28 Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005: 7.

29 Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005: 7.

30 Jennifer Nerby and Lauren Mathae, "Drug Trafficking: Central America's Dark Shadow," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, no. 31 (2011): 2.

31 Lisa Evans, "Mapping murder throughout the world," Data Blog, *The Guardian*. 10 October 2011

Reisman, Lainie. "Breaking the Vicious Cycle: Responding to Central American Youth Gang Violence," SAIS Review, The Johns Hopkins University Press, no.26 (2006): 147-152.

Shifter, Michael. "Central America's Security Predicament," *Current History*, no.110 (2011): 49-55.

Shifter, Michael. "Countering Criminal Violence in Central America." Washington Office on Latin America, no.64 (2012): 1-30.

"The Drug War Hits Central America," *The Economist*, April 14, 2011.