

# DISORDER ON THE BORDER

By David J. Danelo

A *Proceedings* regular reprises his assessment last year of cooperation between Mexico and the United States against illegal trafficking across their shared border. Today, a major concern is accelerated violence fueled by Mexican drug cartels.





REUTERS (ALEJANDRO BRINGAS)

**CITY UNDER SIEGE** The border city of Ciudad Juárez has turned into a dangerous place recently, as rival drug gangs clash in the streets. Here, seven bullet-riddled and tortured bodies lie beside threatening banners as police investigate on 25 November 2008.

“**Y**ou shouldn’t stay overnight,” said the waitress at El Paso’s Camino Real Hotel in January 2009, referring to her hometown of Ciudad Juárez. “Don’t you know what is happening there?” She was a petite woman with pale skin and black hair. Her brown eyes projected concern, fear, and surprise when I questioned her about the local hotels on *el otro lado*, the other side. Starting in November 2008, after two men were murdered at dusk about 50 feet from her front door, she would only commute to work from Juárez in a car and during daylight. Her supervisor had juggled her work schedule so she could stay safe.

I walked around Juárez for the afternoon and was surprised to find the market, or *mercado*, filled with shoppers. Ordinarily this was *siesta* time, but not anymore; wives and families completed purchases during the daylight so they could avoid venturing out after dark. Their residences had become fortresses; their yards were barricades.

“Everyone is paying money to *El Chapo*,” said a bartender, referring to the kingpin of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquin “Shorty” Guzman Loera. Bilingual stores paid \$1,500 a month in protection; Mexican-only businesses forked over the same amount in pesos. Uniformed *policia* had established a perimeter around the shopping district. Rumor was these *policia* worked for *El Chapo*. I returned to El Paso, saddened to see Juárez dissolving into anarchy.

## Confronting the Cartels

Winning the war against Mexico’s drug cartels and developing sustainable security policies with our southern neighbor represents the U.S. foreign-policy equivalent of the domestic health-care debate. Potential solutions to the border’s myriad and well-known dilemmas—Mexico’s fragile democracy, North America’s integrated economy, illegal immigration, drug enforcement, counter-terrorism, environmental pollution, water supplies, energy policies, human trafficking, gun smuggling—come in two varieties. On one side, wonks compete in cloistered academic and political environments, jockeying to illustrate the theory best suited for reform. On the other, talk radio hosts and TV news anchors fan the public fire, emotionally convicting Mexico of responsibility for all of America’s social ills.

Over the past three years, the U.S. and Mexican governments have publicly issued individual and joint strategies for waging war against Mexico’s drug cartels. Both nations rhetorically endorse partnership; since December 2006, President Felipe Calderón’s commitment to break organized crime in Mexico has generated hundreds of conferences, meetings, working groups, action committees, recommendations, and liaison officers between federal agencies. Simultaneously, geopolitical rivalries and domestic politics constrain the United States and Mexico from jointly employing the most effective tactics for the fight. Although state and local officials have developed bi-national coalitions, fusion centers, and informal networks, the border itself remains as much of an obstacle for authorities to negotiate as for smugglers.

The Gulf, Juárez, Sinaloa, Tijuana, and La Familia cartels have responded to the attempted crackdown with a trail of cocaine-fueled carnage. The growing casualties throughout northern Mexico, particularly south of El Paso in Chihuahua, serve as a bloody statement of their own strategy: kill or bribe officials from any organization threatening their business model.

The *narcos* do not hold press conferences. Instead, they post photographs and video of severed heads and appendages, leaving garish signs for local media and YouTube consumption. Networked with street



**U.S. BORDER SECTORS** To help keep border trafficking in check, various sectors from California to Texas have been established. But cooperation between U.S. and Mexican authorities has been spotty at best.

gangs, cartel soldiers expand and contract their spheres of authority according to the demands of their enterprise in over 230 U.S. cities, according to a December 2008 U.S. government report.

## A Criminal Insurgency

In 2008, Los Angeles County Sheriff John Sullivan and analyst Adam Elkus argued that Mexico’s drug cartels represented a criminal insurgency that threatened state stability.<sup>1</sup> “Not all insurgencies conform to the classic Leninist or Maoist models,” wrote Sullivan and Elkus. “Some insurgents don’t want to take over the government or force it to accede to ideological demands. They want a piece of the state that they can use to develop parallel structures for profit. Inasmuch as they use political violence to accomplish this goal, they are insurgents—albeit of a criminal variety.”

Much of Mexico’s criminal insurgency campaign has been focused in the north. As a consequence of the North American Free Trade Agreement, northern Mexico has made tremendous gains in development over the last 15 years. Since the treaty’s implementation, the four U.S. and six northern Mexican states have fused into a joint economic engine. According to the World Institute for Strategic Economic Research, 83 percent of the annual trade between the United States and Mexico passes through a land port of entry. Between 85 and 90 percent of all *maquiladora* manufacturing—

parts made in Mexico and shipped into the United States—happens in a Mexican border state.

In May 2008, when the United States slumped into a housing crisis, the McAllen, Texas, metro area’s real estate market was growing at the highest rate in the country (4.2 percent). Three other Texas border cities, El Paso, Laredo, and Brownsville, were in the top 20. Put together, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila—Mexico’s four northeast border states—have a gross domestic product per capita 2.3 times greater than the rest of Mexico combined.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, connectivity is a sword that cuts both ways. From January 2007 to May 2009, 4,309 of Mexico’s 9,903 drug war deaths (44 percent) happened in a Mexican border state.<sup>3</sup> Urban gateways that funnel into major smuggling corridors (often called *plazas*) had become the cartel’s hard-fought prize. Thus, Matamoros, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Nogales, and Tijuana—and, by extension, the

border states where they reside—have become the primary battlegrounds to supply drugs into the United States.

One quarter of all drug-war casualties (2,502) have occurred in Chihuahua. In Nuevo Laredo, Los Zetas advertise medical care and social benefits for families of recruits, just as Hezbollah has done in southern Lebanon. In Sinaloa, just south of Sonora, an American teacher working in Mexico, Allan Wall, estimates a third of local university faculty teach finance, accounting, and business management for “El Chapo” Guzman, providing the underpinnings for his illegal enterprise.

## Strategy and Tactics

On an otherwise bare white wall inside Lieutenant Sullivan’s Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Emergency Operation Center, a posted placard proclaims this timeless wisdom. “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory,” says the sign. “Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” The lesson in this Zen riddle: if the strategic and tactical levels of an organization’s plan lack operational unity, the group will not respond effectively to a crisis or thwart a determined enemy. Absent clarity of purpose, and facing an opponent whose will to fight remains unbroken, no unit—or nation—can achieve a decisive win. At best, the belligerents will muddle into stalemate. At worst, they will be shamed and defeated by a superior foe.

Mexican soldiers and federal agents are stuck in an intractable fight with limited resources. Troops are “under-

equipped, unsupported, and absurdly underpaid,” wrote Kelly Phillips, the wife of a Mexican naval officer, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece. By controlling local regions of political leadership, cartels create zones of authority that effectively represent states within states, resulting in a hollowing of federal authority.

“Calderón has displaced the traditional balance between the federal government and Mexican organized crime,” said analyst Sam Logan, author of a book about the MS-13 street gang. “Many Mexicans, it seems, would prefer if Calderón left the cartels alone.”

Unless cities in northern Mexico increase their capacity to provide local security, the criminal insurgency will continue unabated. “It’s increasingly becoming a war of all against all, with no rules,” said counterinsurgency expert Toby Dodge in 2005 when a reporter asked for his assessment of the Iraq insurgency. In February 2009, CNN’s Anderson Cooper offered an identical description of Ciudad Juárez. “They’ve been there for a hundred years,” Logan summarizes, “and they will be there a hundred more.”

Were it not for U.S.-Mexico economic ties, this condition might be easier to ignore. Next to Canada and China, Mexico is America’s most important trading partner—a reality not lost on U.S. industry. “State failure in Mexico, aside from the chaos that is already seeping across the border, has the potential to severely disrupt supply chains that span that border,” warned Stephen Carmel, Senior Vice President, Maersk, when speaking at the May 2009 Joint Warfighting Conference sponsored by the Naval Institute and the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association:

While container cargo is normally associated with ships, only about half the total containerized goods entering this country comes via ship, the rest come across the borders with Mexico and Canada. Much of that trade is in inter-

mediate goods, where the same item may cross the border multiple times in varying stages of production. A disruption in those supply chains represents a potential for considerable disruption in manufacturing in the U.S., not just an interruption in a flow of finished goods.

If the analysts are correct, and Mexico and the United States are indeed engaged in a criminal insurgency against the cartels, then any framework for progress should analyze modern counterinsurgency doctrine for useful ideas. Although some U.S. politicians have called for an increase of American troops on the border, both U.S. and Mexican government officials say this would be counterproductive. Their assessment validates counterinsurgency theory, which argues for most security solutions being developed at a local rather than federal level. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan local analysis has resulted in strategic investment of national power into law enforcement, judicial, and infrastructure projects in key regions like Al Anbar Province, the Korangal Valley, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, respectively.

## The Real Border Situation

Official platitudes from both sides obscure realities along the border, where paramilitary and law enforcement partnerships ebb and flow ad hoc. According to U.S. Border Patrol agents, unofficial cooperation with Mexican authorities is routine practice in many sectors. Intelligence sharing and

## Battle Over ‘B.C. Bud’

The Mexican border is not the only U.S. national boundary where the drug war has created a spillover effect. Since Toronto and Montreal are both 400 miles from the heart of Manhattan, they traditionally draw the most U.S. attention. But authorities have grown increasingly concerned over the rising drug-related violence in British Columbia.

In Vancouver, the city that will host the 2010 Winter Olympics, a turf war between rival gangs over local marijuana trading rights has spilled into neighborhoods and city parks. “The war in Mexico directly impacts on the drug trade in Canada,” a British Columbia law enforcement officer told the *Los Angeles Times*. Authorities say the crackdown on cocaine traffickers

in Mexico has lowered profits for cocaine north of the U.S. border. The war has also raised the price of

“B.C. Bud,” western Canada’s powerful home-grown marijuana, which has a \$6.3 billion annual value. Vancouver-based gangs are fighting for the right to grow and barter local marijuana in exchange for distribution rights over Mexican cocaine.

According to government reports, Canadian drug organizations are learning from their Mexican counterparts and trading partners. Gang members use planes, helicopters, and tunnels to move drugs, paneling trucks with hidden compartments and devices to avoid detection. Prior to a trilateral



August 2009 summit, Canada pledged \$15 million toward a U.S.-led partnership, offering its Federal Mounted Police to train Mexican officers. “Supporting police training in Mexico is one of the most effective ways to fight organized crime and drug trafficking within Canada,” said Prime Minister Stephen Harper in a written statement. Officials also hope such partnerships will reduce local violence before the global spotlight shines on Vancouver next year.

—D. Daneilo

collaboration with Mexican soldiers occurs at the El Paso Intelligence Center. Agents from the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Agency conduct raids alongside masked Mexican counterparts. According to U.S. officials, Mexican soldiers exchange radio frequencies with U.S. Border Patrol agents in the Tucson Sector, and have even jointly participated in apprehensions. "Our cooperation with the U.S. has never been better," an El Paso-based Mexican consular official said.

At the same time, and even in some of the same cities, other authorities say partnership is non-existent. "We can't work with anyone in Mexico, military or law enforcement," said a Tijuana-based U.S. federal agent. "There is no real trust." In 2007, I stood on the Rio Grande and watched scouts for Mexican smugglers sitting inside a red Ford F-150 on the other side of the river; brazenly peering through binoculars. A Brownsville-based Border Patrol agent stood next to me and lamented his lack of credible Mexican partners. "There's no one I can call on the other side." Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives agents in Phoenix tell cynical stories about capturing men making large weapon purchases in the United States only to find them changing into police or military uniforms in Mexico.<sup>4</sup> This tactical inconsistency reflects the absence of a bi-national border-security strategy.

The ready supply of assault rifles at U.S. gun shows, which has armed Mexican cartels with illegal weapons and fueled a robust underground drugs-for-guns trade, has renewed calls for banning assault rifles as a response to the violence. In December 2008, an AR-15 rifle—the civilian version of an M-16—sold at a gun shop in the Texas-Mexico border town of Eagle Pass for three times as much as the same weapon sold in San Antonio. According to Mayor Chad Foster of Eagle Pass, a lifetime gun enthusiast, few gun stores on the border can keep AR-15s in stock. "As soon as one comes in, it's gone," Foster said.

## Decriminalization?

Since demand to supply American customers with illegal drugs drives the violence in Mexico, many advocates have urged U.S. authorities to consider decriminalization as a response to reduce the killing. A swelling tide supports marijuana legalization, including figures as politically diverse as U.S. Senator Jim Webb (D-VA), former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, editors from *The Economist* and *National Review*, and a host of Latin American leaders.

In 2001, in an effort to reduce the impact of drug use on society, Portugal became the first western country to abolish criminal penalties for all drugs. Crime fell, the judicial burden was reduced, and drug use did not rise. "It's fair to say that decriminalization in Portugal met its central goal," said Peter Reuter, a University of Maryland criminology and public policy professor, at an April 2009 Cato Institute presentation. Reuter did note that Portugal's small size and population may have influenced the result. In August 2009, Mexico also decriminalized personal possession of drugs, partially building their new laws on the Portuguese model.

In light of Portugal's demonstrated success and the strain of enforcing existing federal drug laws, calls for

decriminalization are likely to grow in the United States as Mexico's war drags on. While supporters of legalization work to repeal marijuana prohibition for sound, judicious reasons, they should acknowledge decriminalization's limited effectiveness within the broader U.S.-Mexico context. Drug cartels control criminal enterprises in both the United States and Mexico, including human smuggling, sex trafficking, weapon imports, and kidnapping.

The global recession constricts legitimate business throughout Mexico, and particularly in the north—the region once poised to generate the highest collective standard of living in the country. Arguments about weapon bans and drug legalization mask the long-term issue: the existing economic structures and lack of capacity to handle a criminal insurgency. Cooperative security efforts will be necessary even if drugs are decriminalized throughout the Western Hemisphere.

## International Policing

Ideas for security cooperation that may not work in Washington or Mexico City prove surprisingly viable in border communities. In 2008, the governors of Arizona and Sonora agreed to work cooperatively in an organization called *Policia Internacional Sonora-Arizona*. A driving force behind that agreement was Juan Manuel Pavón Felix, Sonora's chief of police. Widely known as a serious, honorable officer, Pavón was assassinated by a cartel hit squad on 3 November 2008 in Nogales. The U.S. Marshals and Mexican government hailed the lawman as a hero. Even the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, a volunteer group dedicated to preventing illegal border crossings, e-mailed a press release mourning his death. This genuine community appreciation for individual heroism may not be possible to develop in national capitals, but it has both relevance and significant impact along the border.

Focusing on capacity-building on the border region encourages U.S. and Mexican officials to develop partner-



**PURSUITING EL CHAPO** Kingpin of the Sinaloa cartel is Joaquin "Shorty" Guzman Loera, pictured here in a file photo from June 2000, when he was in a high-security Mexican jail. Guzman, who escaped in January 2001, is listed as one of *Forbes* magazine's world's richest people with a fortune estimated at \$1 billion and growing.



**WEAPON OF CHOICE** Once available only to law enforcement and military personnel, the AR-15 rifle is now sold at gun shops and shows across the United States and is finding its way into the hands of the Mexican drug cartels by way of underground “drugs-for-guns” trade.

ships that extend beyond diplomatic courtesies and translate into on-the-ground actions. One strategic security solution may begin with organizing U.S. and Mexican forces, as well as state and local counterparts, along the same terrain into parallel zones of operation. The U.S. Border Patrol deploys units on the southwest border into nine sectors—which have not changed since 1924 when the Border Patrol was formed in response to U.S. demands for illegal alcohol during Prohibition. In Texas, the boundaries of the Border Patrol sectors do not correspond with the Texas Department of Public Safety’s six sectors (developed in 2002), let alone Mexico’s four military sectors (which represent Mexico’s only security structure on their northern border).

A reorganization of sectors could reduce the confusion on both sides of the border and enable bi-national units to better support local assets. While these developments cannot occur without cooperation and approval from Washington and Mexico City, local security partnerships will not materialize unless authorities at all levels endorse the process. Officials will also have to develop bi-national checks and balances, such as electronic monitoring, to create trust and ensure mutual accountability because of the ongoing risk of corruption.

## Implications of the 2012 Election

As Mexico’s 2012 election approaches, the increasing prospect of federal corruption and any possibility of ending the drug war will dominate Mexico’s political conversation. In July of that year, Mexican voters will determine the successor to President Calderón, who, by constitutional law, is restricted to a single six-year term. During the July 2009 mid-term elections, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), who had dominated Mexico’s presidency for 70 years, regained control of Mexico’s Congress. The PRI appears poised to retake the presidency in 2012, which may signal a shift away from Mexico’s aggressive stance against organized crime. Many Mexican voters see a PRI victory as a return to an acceptable

status quo: the cartels and the government reach a truce, and each party retains control in its own respective spheres.

From an economic and local security perspective, the uncertainty of this outcome leaves the border region in a strategic and tactical quandary. Will local security solutions be sustainable? What will happen to state and local politics if and when the Mexican military redeploys, particularly in major battlegrounds like Chihuahua, Sonora, Tijuana, and Ciudad Juárez? Will the border’s economic infrastructure rebound from the heady days of the immediate post-NAFTA era? What strains will U.S. immigration legislation, which President Barack Obama has slated for 2010, place on customs and border authorities?

The U.S. and Mexican governments lack unity of effort in their strategic and tactical approach; the drug cartels, on the contrary, do not. If the words from the sign hanging in the L.A. County Emergency Operations Center about strategy and tactics offer any guidance for a forecast, the U.S. and Mexican governments might be slowly plodding toward victory in their fight against the cartels. But more likely, the institutions of both nations fighting the protracted drug war are blundering, at best, towards a sluggish, painful stalemate. ❁

1. See John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 19 August 2008, and “Plazas for Profit: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 26 April 2009.

2. Mexican-American Free Trade Alliance, San Antonio, Texas, 17 October 2007.

3. See “Mexico Under Siege,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 2009 (multimedia content).

4. Quotes from interviews, May 2007–December 2008.

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