



# Colloquium Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College,  
University of Pittsburgh,

Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies



University of Pittsburgh  
Matthew B. Ridgway Center  
for International Security Studies

## DRUG TRAFFICKING, VIOLENCE, AND INSTABILITY IN MEXICO, COLOMBIA, AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY



Evan Brown  
University of Pittsburgh

Dallas D. Owens  
Strategic Studies Institute

### KEY INSIGHTS:

- The relationships between powerful criminal groups and states are complex and create transnational issues of corruption and the production, transportation, marketing, and consumption of illegal products and services that have national security implications for most states in the Western Hemisphere.
- The Colombian government has successfully responded to challenges from the FARC and several criminal groups, but the challengers have responded with adaptations that ensure their survival. The persistence of these security challenges continue to cause concern over the intersection of drugs and terror.
- Mexico has experienced an increase in organized criminal violence in several of its states; much of the violence is associated with drug trafficking and associated illegal activity. Counterintuitively, some areas sustain high levels of illegal activity without high levels of violence if the state retains sufficient enforcement capacity or cooperates with organized crime.
- U.S. drug policy has had enormous effect on the Mexican drug trade. However, the solution to organized crime and related violence will ultimately rely on Mexican federal, state, and community ability to understand the issues and more effectively combat corruption and gangs, while providing more effective governance and economic opportunities for its citizens.
- The small Caribbean nations are experiencing increases in drug trafficking and related violence, but are even less equipped than their larger neighbors to combat these problems; lack of U.S. support has created a vacuum that is being filled by Cuba and Venezuela.
- Consistently identified issues were: (1) the region's need to address the intersection of corruption and violence, (2) the unexpected and unintended consequences of national and international policies, and (3) the operational issues surrounding the concepts of decriminalization, tolerance of criminal activity, tough stands against criminal activity, and improving governmental systems.

### Introduction.

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

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

Visit our website for other free publication  
downloads

<http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

[To rate this publication click here.](#)

occur, the growing violence and instability in Mexico and the Caribbean will clearly demand greater attention in the future. Until now, Mexico has been seen as simply a border problem. As the trafficking organizations continue to defy authorities, undermine governance, and escalate violence, Mexico has become much more of a national security challenge. Several Caribbean states could fall into the same category. This conference offered an important opportunity to assess these threats, and to consider what can be done to counter them.

### **Panel I: Setting the Scene: Globalization, Transnational Threats, and Borders.**

The first panel introduced the problem of criminal groups in Latin America and their relationship with the state. Panel members and their presentation topics included: (1) Phil Williams, Director, Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies, Chair and Discussant; (2) Vanda Felbab-Brown, Fellow, Brookings Institute, "Drugs, Violence and Instability: A Global Perspective," and Nate Freier, Senior Fellow in the International Security Program at CSIS; Visiting Research Professor at the United States Army's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, "The Changing Strategic Environment and Strategic Shocks."

The first two presenters challenged the conventional views of a state's ability to defeat criminal groups and to restore stability. They argued for a much more complex relationship. The first panelist argued that the rise of violence in Mexico, for example, has been driven in part by the end of the one-party state, and its cooperation with criminal groups. Further successes against criminal groups have created "vacancy chains," gaps in criminal group leadership and organization that have produced even more instability. Similarly, the second panelist made the case for the contribution to stability that criminal groups often bring. In the absence of a strong state, criminal groups can provide public goods that would otherwise be lacking, and serve not just as a target of the state, but as competition. The final panelist examined these issues from the U.S. perspective, discussing the new and varied challenges the United States faces from both state and nonstate actors. He concluded by proposing several possible "strategic shocks" that the United States needs to be concerned about, all of which revolve around instability rather than interstate warfare.

Several participants discussed the problems of dealing with both strong criminal groups and weak states. If criminal groups behave like states, one asked, should the United States treat them as states? Panelists agreed that this needed to be examined on a case by case basis, but they could conceive of such situations. Groups in Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma) were discussed as examples where the support of criminal groups might be consistent with U.S. national interests, and one panelist argued that the United States would need to set aside moral concerns to achieve pragmatic results. A second participant asked how states rebound when their decline results in the shift of political support to state-like criminal groups. One suggestion was that state strength was not the key variable, but state presence instead. While security is primary, the perception of state presence also needs to be positive. If peoples' perception of state presence is primarily punitive, political support will continue to fade.

### **Panel II: Perspectives on Drugs, Violence, and Stability in Colombia.**

The second panel focused on Colombia and looked for solutions to its long-running conflict. The panel consisted of: (1) Steve Metz, Research Professor and Chairman, Regional Strategy Department, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Chair and Discussant; (2) Roman Ortiz, Grupo Triarius, "FARC: Insurgents, Drug Traffickers?" (3) Gustavo Duncan, Doctoral Candidate, Northwestern University, "The Paramilitaries in Colombia"; and (4) Andres Saenz, Grupo Triarius, "Drug Trafficking Organizations: Current Trends and Developments."

The chair framed the problem by noting that the United States was in the process of relearning irregular warfare, but relying primarily on Cold War case studies. Contemporary Colombia, he argued, might be more paradigmatically important. The panelists then examined the FARC, Colombian paramilitaries, and Colombian drug trafficking organizations. Each poses unique challenges to the Colombian state, and play a specific role in the panoply of criminal groups. The FARC has survived, despite success by the Colombian military, by shifting its focus from the peasant class and Marxism to become a more rural, Bolivarian group with increased international ties. The presenter did not see the FARC as remaining a threat to the Colombian state, but neither did he see it at risk of elimination.

The second panelist discussed the role that paramilitary groups at times play by bringing public goods to parts of the nation. He suggested that the state had neither the political capital nor the capability to tax and regulate the dominant illicit economy, consequently, paramilitary groups exploit the black market. For Colombia to regain control, he concluded, it must create an order it can regulate.

The final panelist analyzed the range of drug trafficking organizations and their relationships with the FARC and each other. He explained that these groups no longer seek to dominate all facets of the drug trade, but focus on specific steps. Their increased coordination and cooperation pose a rising threat to the state, requiring substantial resources and a holistic approach to solve the problem.

A conference participant inquired about evidence for a growing FARC-Venezuela relationship. The panelist pointed to not only public statements by President Chavez, but military intelligence captured from rebels, especially Venezuelan made weapons found in rebel camps. A second participant inquired as to whether recent Colombian military successes against the FARC necessitated continued U.S. support. The response noted that even with the greatly shortened life span of criminal leaders, there was enough demand side pressure to repopulate both the FARC and other drug trafficking organizations. The panelist then argued that U.S. support needed to continue because of the intersection of drugs and terror. However, he also suggested that expectations need to be moderated, and that narcoterror could not be defeated, only managed.

### **Panel III and IV: Perspectives on Drug Trafficking and Stability in Mexico.**

The third and fourth panels both analyzed the growing violence and instability in Mexico. Members of Panel 3 were: (1) Kathleen DeWalt, Director, Center for Latin American Studies and Professor of Anthropology and Public Health,

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

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

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

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

#### **Panel V: Perspectives on the Caribbean.**

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

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

Many of the questions from the conference participants asked the panelists to address what needs to be done, both by local governments and the United States, given the complex dynamics in the Caribbean. There was agreement that, despite the impact of the recent recession, governments need to meet the

problem head on, especially in terms of rooting out corruption. One panelist argued for the need to expand opportunity for local citizens as opposed to increasing the strength of the security services. Another discussed the role of Venezuela and especially Cuba in supporting many of these states, and the opinion that this support would continue regardless of the U.S. view of Cuba and Venezuela. Others inquired as to the use and utility of network analysis, specifically whether it implied policy prescriptions. The panelist replied that above all, local policymakers need to better understand the interconnected nature of criminal organizations, and that more training was needed for this purpose. These criminal organizations can only be effectively combated once they are more fully understood.

#### **Panel VI: Assessment and Responses.**

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

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

Questions for the final panel focused substantially on U.S. relationships with local governments. One panelist noted that in the case of Mexico, it is perhaps the easiest example to defend the necessity for U.S. aid policy because of the

synthesis of domestic and international threats. He concluded that current initiatives were generally correct but the United States needs to include the priority for institution building. Other panelists focused on ensuring a coherent and credible U.S. message regarding its drug policy. The United States can only accomplish this by creating an effective partnership at all levels and ensuring long-term resource flows to national, state, and local governments.

#### **Conclusion: The Way Ahead.**

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

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

The views expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This colloquium brief is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

\*\*\*\*\*

More information on the Strategic Studies Institute's programs may be found on the Institute's homepage at [www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil](http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil).