Transnational Organized Crime: Mexico’s Greatest Security Challenge in 2030, and Ways to Mitigate It

Introduction

Transnational organized crime (TOC) will be Mexico’s greatest security challenge in 2030. This essay will explore the myriad threats posed by TOC and suggest strategies to mitigate TOC’s negative impacts on national and human security in Mexico. Though there are many definitions of TOC, they all underscore several key attributes. TOC is a borderless phenomenon where criminal networks form links to expand their illicit businesses and reap greater profits. TOC in Mexico focuses its income-generating activities on drug smuggling and money laundering. TOC has enormous political, economic, and social repercussions for the country, both direct and indirect. With a view to the future, we may see a decline in the smuggling of marijuana due to the legalization of it in some states in the United States. However, studies have shown that as the smuggling of marijuana has decreased, the trafficking of harder drugs (heroin and crystal meth) has increased, with Mexican cartels also looking to diversify their activities by moving into sex trafficking and the theft of crude oil. Until a comprehensive and multilateral approach is developed to combat transnational organized crime in Mexico, TOC will continue to grow, with deleterious implications for Mexican security.

Projected Impacts of TOC in Mexico in 2030

The impacts of TOC in Mexico are numerous. As the increasing rates of homicides, kidnappings and violent robberies illustrate, social violence is an important ramification. According to the Secretaría de Gobernación, there are seven important criminal organizations operating in Mexico and they fight to obtain absolute control over different regions. These territorial disputes and open confrontation with Mexican government institutions have generated a high cost on human lives. As disputes between cartels change, TOC leaders will increasingly resort to other forms of violence such as kidnappings and violent robberies in order to maintain their sources of income. In 2030 we can expect to see an increase in this kind of violence. Statistics provided by INEGI purport that over the past 12 years, violence has been on the rise despite the belief that under a new administration, levels of violence would decline.

Mexico’s efforts to reduce the alarming levels of violence are having a significant impact on the country’s economy. In 2013, the cost of fighting the powerful drug cartels rose to almost $172.7 billion (more than twice Mexico’s foreign debt), according to the Global Peace Index 2014. Mexico’s violence containment costs are not only monetarily much higher than those incurred by Syria, Iraq and Libya, but among the highest in the world. The global economic impact of violence is estimated at $9.8 trillion or 11.3% of the global GDP. In essence, the economic resources required to combat drug trafficking in Mexico surpass the capacity of the state’s financial apparatus. In 2030, if the current situation remains the same and levels of violence
continue to rise, the fight against these drug cartels will most likely be an even heavier burden on the Mexican economy.

TOC also fuels corruption, hollows out state institutions, and results in political instability. The money obtained by these illegal activities is used to fuel bribery and corruption at all government levels, further weakening the ability of the government to respond effectively to counter TOC. *Pax Mafioso* is a specific example of corruption that guarantees votes and support to a politician in exchange for that politician turning a 'blind eye' towards a particular cartel. Some agents of the Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) are believed to work as enforcers for various cartels and, according to the Attorney General, nearly 1,500 of AFI's 7,000 agents were under investigation for suspected criminal activity and 457 were facing charges. In 2030 we are likely to see government security services even more riddled by corruption, further damaging the services’ reputation. As a result, talented Mexicans will be less likely to want to work in the security sector, further damaging the security services.

Overall lack of confidence in the police, as well as in judicial institutions, has raised Mexican citizens’ perceptions of insecurity. In some cases, this has led to the creation of self-defense militias. In the state of Michoacán, thousands of armed militiamen have taken back numerous cities held by the cartels amid an uneasy stand-off with the government. In the future, we may see more militias forming to deal with TOC, a trend with negative repercussions for the legitimacy of the Mexican state.

**Combatting TOC in Mexico**

To combat the many threats posed by TOC, the Mexican government should implement four steps. First, the Mexican government must better use its military and law enforcement personnel. The Mexican military should take a more aggressive role in internal security matters related to anti-crime and anti-narcotics efforts, taking advantage of recent legal changes while still adhering to civilian control. This domestic role for the military should only be temporary and appropriate human rights protections must be established. Mexican police must receive additional training, better pay, more sophisticated equipment, and be vetted more regularly.

Second, the Mexican government should launch a more aggressive public relations campaign specifically targeting the major leaders of the cartels in order to reduce the culture of fear and helplessness they create. Fewer than half (45%) of Mexicans say their government is making progress in its campaign against drug cartels. In order to show that the Mexican government is working for the people, and to highlight the negative effects of TOC in communities, a series of advertisements should be designed. A careful counter-narrative might deflect young citizens from recruitment and mitigate the sense that the government is not doing enough. The Mexican government should supplement this media campaign with concrete action in local communities, especially development efforts. Communities in which people have a wide set of options for legitimate careers will be less tempted to engage in TOC. By doing this, the central
government could harness some of the security resulting from vigilante efforts while ensuring these communities do not evolve into a state of separate self-governance.

Third, the Mexican government must fight corruption at all levels. If public sector wages are too low, employees may find themselves under enormous pressure to supplement their incomes in “unofficial” ways. By increasing civil servants’ income, this may deter incidences of corruption. There should also be increased government accountability. New Zealand, which is consistently one of the top performers in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, is a pioneer in creating transparent budget processes. It approved the Fiscal Responsibility Act, which provided a legal framework for transparent management of public resources. The Mexican government could increase citizens’ trust by openly revealing the budget and plans related to combatting drug cartels.

A final measure should be to strengthen Mexico’s multilateral approach in the fight against TOC. Due to the borderless nature of TOC, Mexico will only be able to fight TOC if it has the support of other countries. For example, both the US and Mexico have a mutual responsibility to fight TOC and therefore should aim to work even more closely together. Mexico should constantly lobby other countries to make counter-TOC a priority and harness other countries’ crime-fighting abilities, intelligence, and expertise.

Conclusion

At least for the next decade, TOC will be an ongoing challenge for Mexico and the greatest threat to the country. With increasing levels of drug trafficking and other illicit activities, as well as associated violence, the Mexican government should aim to reform the security services and law enforcement whilst also deterring government officials from corruption. Furthermore, a counter-narrative should be employed which will target communities so as to discourage them from turning to TOC as a means of income. The Mexican government should also couple this narrative with new development projects. Finally, it will be essential to foster an efficient working relationship with other countries to combat this threat, as one country alone cannot tackle a security threat that transcends borders. If these measures are employed, Mexico may see a decline in TOC in the coming years.

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Works Consulted:
