

Globalization - the Beginning and the End of MS-13?

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Abstract

This paper will document how different manifestations of globalization (e.g., global trade, global migration trends) gave rise to the gang known as *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13). This paper will go on to describe how recent globalization trends have enabled MS-13 to challenge the authority of some nation states. Finally, this paper will argue that the only way to subdue threats like MS-13 is for nation-states to fight fire with fire by making better use of the same technologies that MS-13 has taken advantage of for the past decade.

Key Words: Mara Salvatrucha, Globalization, Illicit Trafficking, Organization of American States

The Origins of Mara Salvatrucha

In May of 2010, the *Washington Post* reported that, “for the third consecutive year, violent crime has declined in the United States, including a 7.2 percent reduction in homicides” (Markton, 2010). Given these statistics, it would seem that law enforcement officials are winning their battle against criminal gangs. Unfortunately, in digging just a bit deeper, one finds quite the opposite to be true. According to a recent National Gang Center report, “gang violence rates have continued [to climb] at exceptional levels over the past decade *despite* the remarkable overall crime drop” (Howell, 2011). This same report indicates that in 2009, fully one-third of the homicides in Chicago and one-half of the homicides in Los Angeles were gang related (Howell, 2011). One large contributor to these statistics was the gang known as *Mara Salvatrucha*, or MS-13.

There are a number of ways to describe *Mara Salvatrucha*; however, one thing it is not is misunderstood. Writers and researchers alike have written endless volumes on the group, to the point to where it almost seems deified. In much the same way, especially over the past two decades, analysts have seemingly squeezed every ounce of blood from the subject of globalization. Interestingly enough, there seems to be a conspicuous absence of research concerning the nexus of these two subject matters. This research gap lends itself to a number of questions; for example, how has globalization played a role in the genesis of MS-13 and how has this gang taken advantage of globalization? The truth of the matter is that MS-13 has learned to leverage the power of globalization, and this does not bode well for others. Before going any further, it is prudent to define the ill-defined term of globalization. While there is a plethora of definitions to choose from, one of the better ones is the definition proffered by author Sumner B. Twiss who defined globalization as, “the multidimensional and interactive processes of economic, political, and cultural change across the world resulting in increased social interconnectedness as well as opportunities for social confrontation among peoples” (Twiss,

2004). Both globalization and MS-13 are complex, but one must understand both if one hopes to stem the growth of this destabilizing organization.

Tracing the development of *Mara Salvatrucha* will help to demonstrate the impact globalization trends have made on this organization. Many associate globalization with the advent of the Internet; however, this perspective is far too narrow in the case of MS-13. In fact, the relationship between MS-13 and globalization date back to the turn of the century. More than one hundred years ago, the flight of capital and global market demand caused the economic collapse of El Salvador. This economic collapse gave rise to civil unrest, which led to a global migration. This global migration caused Salvadoran ghettos to crop up in the United States. It was in the economically distressed ghettos of L.A. that Salvadoran youth came to depend on one another in order to endure violent attacks. Ultimately, these relationships gave rise to *Mara Salvatrucha* as we know it today. Subsequent to the forming of this gang, domestic developments within the United States led to reverses in global migration trends. Upon arriving back in El Salvador, these gang members learned to take advantage of global markets, ultimately trading drugs for money and then, in turn, trading that money for weapons. Globalization has empowered MS-13, and other organizations like them, to the point that they can threaten the sovereignty of weak nation-states. The time has come for the global community to not only acknowledge the gravity of this threat, but to take steps to mitigate it. Herein, one will find a proposal to move toward that end.

A Generation Lost Finds Its Own Way

One could argue that the rampant violence that emanates from El Salvador today traces its roots to coffee seeds planted decades ago. Around the turn of the century, ships began to transition from sail to steam, and when this occurred, international commerce spiked. Looking to cash in on this new opportunity, business owners wasted no time in tapping into Central America's rich natural resources. In the case of El Salvador, this meant coffee. A series of land reforms transferred communal lands to private corporations, and shortly thereafter, these pastoral spaces blossomed into plantations known as *latifundios* (Vargas, 2003). Because of these land reforms, an inordinate amount of the nation's wealth consolidated into the hands of ruling elite (Letovsky, 2004). The impact of these land reforms did not become apparent until the Great Depression caused the coffee industry to collapse, and when the price of coffee plummeted, so did the peasants' standard of living. By the end of the 1930s, numerous armed groups began to revolt against the landed aristocracy; however, thanks to brutal repression by the Army, the ruling elite were able to maintain the *status quo* (Vargas, 2003). Admittedly, this is a cursory overview of El Salvador's coffee industry; however, it does illustrate how the global flow of capital made an indelible mark on El Salvador's economy, as well as its society.

Although the amount of Salvadoran violence ebbed and flowed over the years, the Army was able to subdue it for the most part. This *status quo* changed in the 1970s. The event that tipped the scales was the presidential election of 1972. In that year, Jose Napoleon Duarte, running on a land-reform platform, won the nation's presidential election race; that was, until the Army intervened and nullified the election (Letovsky, 2004). In response, what heretofore had been a disparate collection of dissidents, coalesced into what would come to be known as the *Frente Faribundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional* (FMLN) (Vargas, 2003). Always on the lookout for an opportunity, the Soviet Union was quick to back the FMLN rebels, and in response, the United States countered (Burnett, 2011). In short order, El Salvador devolved into a violent

proxy war. This abridged historical vignette serves to demonstrate the power of globalization; in this instance, readers can see how the national interests of Cold War super powers trumped the sovereignty of a third-world nation.

By 1980, El Salvador was on the brink of chaos, and its citizens began to flee abroad. Many of these refugees sought protection in the United States. In 1981, this already substantial flow of immigrants reached a fevered pace. This had much to do with two high-profile attacks that took place in El Salvador. In March of 1980, gunmen executed Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero while the priest was in the middle of saying a mass (Project Look Sharp, 2009). A few months later, members of the Salvadoran National Guard raped and executed four female church volunteers (Project Look Sharp, 2009). Because of these tragic events, and in response to the media exposure that followed, churchgoers in the United States began to rally in support of the Salvadoran refugees. In fact, thanks to the efforts of people from a wide array of faiths, a kind of *Underground Railroad* formed between El Salvador and the United States (Gzesh, 2006). This group of like-minded people evolved into a network of volunteers who started to refer to themselves as the Sanctuary Movement (Gzesh, 2006). Over the course of the next decade, this civic institution helped to usher in thousands of what Dr. Bhagwati calls “involuntary” immigrants (Bhagwati, 2004). In fact, some experts estimate that the number of illegal immigrants that passed into the United States during this period measures in the hundreds of thousands (Johnson, 2006). This flow of illegal immigrants goes a long way to illustrate how globalization can affect a society. In this instance, the global media focus on political events in El Salvador gave rise to a social movement, and thereafter, this group helped to modify global immigration trends.

Certainly, the Sanctuary Movement was instrumental in getting Salvadoran immigrants to the United States. That said, one could argue that the organization actually caused as many problems as it solved, for arrival in the United States was only a first step. Upon setting foot in the United States, these immigrants discovered that the land of opportunity was also fraught with risk and uncertainty. Not only did they not have a place to call home, but also they lacked employment, they were not acknowledged by the government of the United States, and in most cases, they did not speak English. To cope with this chaos, enclaves of Salvadoran refugees began to spring up; most notably in “Washington, DC, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, New York, and Chicago” (Gzesh, 2006). The adult immigrants had their difficulties during this transition; however, they were not alone. During this period, the children of these immigrants struggled to gain acceptance, or in some instances, struggled to survive. According to one congressional report, many gang members cite “poverty, social exclusion, and a lack of educational and job opportunities” as the reasons why they join a gang in the first place (Seelke, 2010). While these conditions do not describe the situation for all Salvadoran youth, they did hold true for most growing up in Southern California. This being the case, it should come as no surprise that one can trace the roots of Salvadoran gang activity back to the *barrios* of Los Angeles.

The exact origin of Salvadoran gangs is difficult to pinpoint; that said, most experts agree that Salvadoran youth in L.A. initially banded together out of fear. In the early 1980s, violence gripped the streets of L.A., with Mexicans battling African Americans for control of territory (Johnson, 2006). Caught in the crossfire, the young Salvadorans banded together out of self-preservation (Franco, 2010). In time, these relationships of convenience, forged in the crucible of battle, developed into a brotherhood. This group came to refer to themselves as *Mara Salvatrucha*; a term, which, loosely translated, means shrewd, Salvadoran gang member (Arana,

2005). Over the course of the 1980s, L.A. gangs became more violent, and *Mara Salvatrucha* was no exception. The violent episodes reached a new height in 1992 following the highly publicized Rodney King trial. The jury in this case acquitted four Los Angeles police officers that were accused of beating African American Rodney King; this despite video footage of what looked to be clear evidence of excessive force. Immediately after officials announced the results of the trial, Los Angeles erupted into violence. In fact, the unrest became so great that United States Marines from a nearby base were ordered to quell the violence (Watts, 2003). Following this outbreak of unrest, city officials understood that the time had come to make drastic policy changes. To begin with, the State of California passed stringent new anti-gang laws (Arana, 2005). What is more, new anti-immigration laws paved the way for the deportation of convicted non-citizen felons (Arana, 2005). Because of this new get-tough sentiment, the U.S. sent thousands of criminals to Central America. Unfortunately for the criminals, and the countries in receipt of those criminals, these individuals “were deported to countries they barely knew” (Arana, 2005). Although these policies served U.S. short-term interests, they would cause unintended and unwanted second and third order effects. From this series of events, globalization binds different corners of the globe together. In this case, although officials did not realize it at the time, the impact of a U.S. domestic issue was about to manifest itself at the doorstep of El Salvador.

In El Salvador, many of these deported criminals were unable to speak the native language (Johnson, 2006). That being the case, they were also unable to find employment. While this language barrier was a problem for their parents, it posed less of a problem for these individuals. This obstacle posed less of a problem in El Salvador because these criminals possessed two things their parents did not; namely, a fraternal network of cohorts, and a willingness to flout the law. In fact, one could argue that the environment in El Salvador paved the way for more unethical behavior. Not having the skills to integrate into Salvadoran society, the *Salvatrucha* turned inward and came to depend on one another more than ever before. What is more, early on, the anemic nature of El Salvador’s police force did little to deter the *Salvatruchas*’ criminal leanings (Arana, 2005).

Early on, Salvadoran officials were unaware of the criminal backgrounds of these new arrivals, and thus, they paid them little attention (Arana, 2005). The *Salvatruchas* quickly discovered that their arrival in El Salvador was a blessing in disguise. Not only did their deportation gain them access to new drug consumers, but they soon realized that Salvadoran security forces were no match for their firepower, money, and audacity (Arana, 2005). Over time, Salvadorans became appalled at the devolution of their society. In reaction to these events, the Salvadoran government enacted strict anti-gang laws, known as *mano dura* (Seelke, 2010). As a direct result of these draconian policies, prisons began to overflow. In fact, some of these facilities saw populations grow to two and three times their designed capacity (Seelke, 2010). Rather than serving as reform institutions, these overwhelmed prisons transformed into what one expert referred to as “gangland finishing schools” (Arana, 2005). In these overcrowded facilities, prisoners learned how to network with one another. What is more, these burgeoning entrepreneurs soon discovered a new business model. Soon, the *Salvatruchas* forged an enduring link between their immerging market in El Salvador and their suppliers back home in L.A., and in so doing, they created a new and deadly start-up (Strickland, 2009). Whereas in the past, global migration trends enabled Salvadorans to escape violence, now global migration was playing quite a different role; for in this instance, global migration enabled the *Salvatruchas* to bring their violence to others. This example also goes a long way to illustrate the schizophrenic

nature of globalization; for it seems that for every positive aspect of globalization, there exists an equal and opposite aspect.

In the years immediately following their exile to El Salvador, the *Salvatruchas* focused much of their energy on the illicit drug trade. In retrospect, when it comes to *Mara Salvatrucha*, many look upon those early years as the proverbial good old days. Unfortunately, in the years since, the group has diversified its portfolio, and in the process, it has evolved into a much more dangerous and elusive threat. To be certain, numerous foot soldiers continue to extort money and sell drugs; however, nowadays, gang members are involved in any number of illicit activities (*The Economist*, 2006). According to reports from the El Salvador National Civilian Police (PNC) Intelligence Center, *Mara Salvatrucha* has expanded its portfolio to include such things as “extortion; prostitution; homicide; and illegal movement of drugs, people, and arms across borders” (Bruneau, 2005). As it expands the scope of its operations, MS-13 has also been improving the way it makes use of technology; for example, some members use disposable cellular phones while others use encrypted messages on web pages. This embrace of technology serves one purpose; to coordinate activities while remaining beyond the grasp of law enforcement officials (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2009). What is more, the *Salvatruchas* are also opting for more deadly weapons such as M-16s and AK-47s (Olson, 2010). This marriage of interconnectedness, money, manpower, and weaponry does not bode well for the future.

As MS-13 continues to evolve, the trend amongst its leadership seems to be towards less risky ventures, such as illicit human trafficking (Johnson, 2011). Equally concerning is that new members are now discouraged from getting tattoos. For years, overt tattoos demonstrated members’ commitment to the cause. Now those tattoos are discouraged for they only serve to attract law enforcement attention. It seems that with each passing day, the *mara* members grow more sophisticated. In fact, renowned gang expert Mr. John Sullivan claims that *Mara Salvatrucha* has now evolved into a second-generation gang (Sullivan, 1997). Said another way, the *Salvatruchas* have evolved from a traditional gang into a “market-oriented drug gang” (Sullivan, 2008). Once gangs evolve to this level, they often begin to behave more like conventional businesses than a collection of criminals; for example, they begin to look to technology to solve their global coordination requirements. The next evolutionary step is perhaps the most alarming, that being the conversion of illicit drug money into corporate dividends (Esperanza, 2010). This is a particularly sinister development because it is at this point that the gangs begin to accrue substantial wealth, and with that wealth, power. More concerning than the potential economic might of these groups is the potential threat that they could pose to nation-states once they accumulate said wealth. Author Max G. Manwaring warns that there is every possibility that the *Salvatruchas* may soon “seize political power to guarantee the freedom of action and the commercial environment they want” (Manwaring, 2005). With each passing day, *Mara Salvatrucha*, and other organizations of its ilk are growing stronger and more independent. Global technologies only serve to enhance this trend. Nation-states still have time to act against this threat, but their window of opportunity is drawing to a close. Unless states choose to act in a coordinated fashion, they may find that non-state actors, empowered by global technologies, are *the* development that finally upsets the international order, an order that has reigned supreme since the Treaty of Westphalia.

Charting the Way Ahead

Nation-states need to determine ways to stem the tide of growing instability. As a good first step, officials would be wise to borrow from the military's playbook. If there is one thing that the military does that distinguishes it from other organizations, it is its willingness and ability to plan. To this point, when confronted with a problem, the first thing that military planners try to do is to understand the situation. Planners begin by trying to learn more about three aspects of the situation: enemy forces (in this case, MS-13), friendly forces (in this case security forces), and finally, the surrounding environment. For nation-states, MS-13 poses a particularly difficult threat; this has much to do with the way MS-13 is networked across multiple countries. Another challenge associated with MS-13 is that it is a learning organization in that it constantly develops new techniques to exploit governmental weak points. One last characteristic that bears mentioning is that *Mara Salvatrucha* draws its strength from disenfranchised youth. When it comes to an analysis of the friendly situation, certain attributes of these organizations make them poorly suited to deal with the MS-13 threat. The first of these qualities is their hierarchical nature. Because of their rigid organizational structure, these institutions are slow to act and even slower to change. The other important thing to realize is that national boundaries normally slow down the operations of these state agencies. This stands in stark contrast with MS-13 who looks upon national borders as an opportunity that it can exploit. The environment in which these two adversaries contest one another consists of three domains: a cognitive domain, an informational domain, and a physical domain. Besides doing battle in the streets of various nations (the physical domain), these two forces also wage a battle of ideas in the minds of the bystanders. It is there, in the psyche of the people, that the battle will be won or lost. If governmental organizations can convince the people to rally behind them, MS-13 operations will quickly grind to a halt because without the consent of the people, MS-13 will not be able to survive. In sum, the key to overcoming the *Salvatruchas* is to exercise good governance. To win over the people, nations must protect their people, provide them essential services, and offer them hope for the future. Unfortunately, as are many things in life, this prescription is easier said than done.

To be certain, improving the way nations govern themselves is a tall order; moreover, it is doubtful that a set of generic policies can be applied universally. However, while the policies themselves may have to change from one country to the next, what can remain consistent is the approach that policy makers utilize. As opposed to a single well-reasoned policy change, what this challenge calls for is a series of well-coordinated actions. Said another way, what the international community requires is a strategy, a plan that will coordinate various activities in time and space. Two ingredients that will be critical to success will be patience and endurance, for this is a generational problem set. This strategy will need to include both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Similarly, it will need to address short-term problems without losing sight of long-term objectives. Lastly, this strategy will need to cast a wide net in that it will have to coordinate the efforts of multiple stakeholders such as state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private industry, to name but a few. Of course, conceiving of a strategy is one thing; enacting it will be substantially more difficult.

One might ask who would write such a strategy and who would coordinate these activities. Similarly, it is reasonable to wonder how governments could transform a strategy like this into action on the ground. One idea would be to have the Organization of American States (OAS) take on this challenge. This regional organization, the world's oldest, came into being

more than fifty years ago (Organization of American States, 2011). Although some nations currently have their membership suspended, every nation in the Western Hemisphere is part of this body. In fact, this robust membership is the very thing that puts the OAS in a position to be able to supervise the implementation of such a strategy. Since the OAS has so many other responsibilities, it is likely that this institution would establish a counter-gang task force to coordinate the efforts of member states. Should it elect to pursue this option, the OAS would do well to pattern its task force after the FBI's Violent Gang Task Forces (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2011). By building upon the FBI's model, the OAS could address all violent gangs, not simply *Mara Salvatrucha*. Unlike the FBI, the OAS, with its many diplomats, would be in a better position to influence policy decisions. Specifically, the OAS could work to close loopholes that exist amongst national policies. The OAS could also assist nations by sharing best practices, such as fighting corruption or training police forces. In addition to all of its other qualities, the OAS has a long history of assisting with developmental projects. Because of this developmental lineage, the OAS would be particularly well suited to help nations address the root causes that give rise to criminals like the *Salvatruchas*. In sum, the OAS is in a unique position to be able to coordinate both top-down and bottom-up solutions throughout the Western Hemisphere. While the organization has not produced tangible results for some time, that should not be used as an excuse to avoid trying the approach prescribed herein.

Conclusion

The phenomenon known as globalization is equal parts good and evil, and its impact is completely dependent upon the intentions of those who wield its power. Nation states have two choices when it comes to globalization: shape it, or be shaped by it. Should policy-makers choose to ignore globalization, they do so at their own peril, for globalization will inevitably make an impact on the world; the only question is who will guide its implementation.

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