

The National and International Threat of Drug Trafficking Organizations

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Abstract

Throughout the past few decades, drug trafficking has been a solid source of revenue for organized crime. The violence, sociological, economic, and social damage caused by the actions of drug trafficking organizations (DTO's) is substantial. This will discuss how DTO's operate and why the actions of DTO's damage the United States (U.S.) and Mexico. Additionally, this paper is going to discuss precautions that could be considered ineffective and alternatives to the current strategy. DTO's primarily operate on the principle of moving logistics rather than trafficking drugs. The movement of logistics hurts the U.S. because of the violence associated with cartel operations, the breached security of the U.S./Mexico and the funding of organizations involved in the trafficking process. The general mindset amongst U.S. citizens is that if drugs were legalized, DTO leaders were removed directly, and if punishments on U.S. soil were made more severe, then DTO operations would end and violence would be reduced. The implausibility of those actions is discussed as well as suggesting possible alternative strategies. These strategies include reclassifying DTO's as terrorist organizations, waging unconventional warfare stateside and internationally, and attacking DTO's through their revenue.

Key Words: Drug Trafficking Organizations, National Policy, Violence, National Security, International Security

Introduction

On 29 January 2014, James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence for the U.S. listed organized crime as one of the top ten threats to the U.S. for 2014-2015 (Clapper, 2014). According to Clapper, "Transnational Organized Crime" threatens the U.S. economy and national security in addition to undermining certain local governments (Ibid). When Clapper addresses "Transnational Organized Crime," he is quick to mention Mexican drug cartels (Ibid). Why would Clapper list cartels as one of the top national security threats for the U.S.?

Before the threats can be understood, it is important to first understand most drug cartels operate in a business like fashion. One example is the structure of the Mexican drug cartel La Familia Michoacana (also known as LFM). LFM has a business structure with a clear chain of command, a training and indoctrination program, and a compact by which each cartel member swears to live and operate (Kostenik & Skarbek, 2013).

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Once the structure of a DTO is understood, it is important to understand what DTO's do. According to their titles, DTO's are organizations that traffic drugs. Evelyn Morris suggests that DTO's are less concerned with drugs, but more concerned with resources for potential buyers (Morris, 2013). These include but are not limited to electronics, consumer goods, and weaponry (Ibid).

Where resources appear, it is important to question the resources origin. When looking at DTO's, different cartels get resources from different sources. Approximately 90% of the cocaine used in the U.S. comes from Columbia and the majority of opium transported internationally comes from Afghanistan (DEA, 2011 & Graham-Harrison, 2014). Generally, DTO's do not produce the resources themselves, they purchase or transport logistics for other organizations. Now that the business like structure, underlying motives, and operational methods of DTO's have been discussed, why are DTO's a threat? Because of the violence on U.S. and Mexican soil, the breached security of the U.S./Mexican border, and the indirect threats raised through the drug trade.

The threat of violence associated with DTO operations

It is important to recognize why DTO's are violent in their operations. DTO's are determined to protect their operations. Due to the business like structure of DTO's and the focus on moving logistics, DTO's will do what is necessary to protect their daily operations. Some would say that, "Mexico is in the midst of a battle between warring organized crime factions, commonly known as cartels, who use subversion, penetration and corruption of state institutions, including police, prosecutors and even the military, in conjunction with extreme violence to control the drug trade (Simser, 2011)."

Looking at the quote above, there are two things to consider. At the end of the quote, it essentially says that everything is done in an attempt to "control the drug trade," or the market (Ibid). Second, it is apparent that there is both intentional and unintentional violence caused by DTO's. The author states that DTO operations have impacted Mexico as a whole and violence is commonly associated with DTO operations (Ibid). To support the author's point, consider the struggle between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels in Ciudad Juárez. Ciudad Juárez was considered to be a crossing point from Chihuahua, Mexico to Texas for the transportation of cocaine and marijuana (Lopez, 2014). Due to the common trading grounds, a conflict between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartel broke out, unofficially dubbing Ciudad Juárez "Mexico's most violent city" in 2008 ("Drug Wars", 2009). This conflict was primarily over the control of resources and business. The threat of collateral damage due to DTO methods is one that must not be overlooked.

The threat of breached U.S. and Mexico national borders

The threat of breached U.S. borders is an overarching and commonly overlooked threat. The fact that DTO's commonly smuggle controlled and or illegal resources into the U.S. shows that the U.S. national border is breached. The breached U.S. border is a threat not because drugs are being smuggled into the U.S., but because of the business like nature of DTO's. DTO's move logistics and are concerned with the profit gained in the movement of resources. Should a terrorist organization commission a DTO to transport weapons of mass destruction or personnel onto U.S. soil, the damage could be immeasurable.

These smuggling networks are not limited to work from Mexico to the U.S., but also vice versa. In 2011, a gun smuggling ring based out of Mexico was busted in the act of smuggling small arms from Madera, California to Mexico (Jimenez, 2011). If a terrorist organization based out of the U.S. decided to use smuggling tunnels to target Mexico, the results could be just as devastating as a terrorist organization targeting the U.S.

The threat of the movement of DTO funds

DTO's also pose a threat to the U.S. and Mexico because of the money involved with DTO operations. As said before, most DTO's do not produce the majority of their own drugs. Cocaine usually comes from Columbia and opium usually comes from Afghanistan. Columbian cocaine was sold by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) to fund their attempted revolution in Columbia (Tompkins, 2013). In the past, Afghani opium and opium based drugs were supplied by Taliban drug lords and funded the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan (Nelson, 2010). In essence, two revolutionary forces overseas were funded by DTO's selling their resources.

DTO's continue to operate and pose a threat because of the money they gain through operations. Not only do the suppliers of drugs gain revenue from supplying DTO's with drugs, but the DTO's gain revenue when selling drugs. Considering the business like structure of DTO's, they will not lose money on their main source of income.

In summary, DTO's operate in a business like fashion in which they move resources that are usually provided by a third party. DTO operations are dangerous to U.S. and Mexican national security because of the violence associated with DTO operations, the breached security of the U.S./Mexican national border, and the funding of DTO's and third party organizations. While there have been actions taken to reduce the impact of DTO's operations stateside, more drastic and concentrated efforts must be taken in regards to the DTO situation.

Common misconceptions about fighting the "drug war"

With a threat as imminent and dangerous as DTO's and all the variables surrounding their operations, it is important to look at misconceptions surrounding current strategy. It is commonly thought that if the U.S. were to legalize drugs, if Mexico and the U.S. were to target DTO leaders directly, and if the U.S. and Mexico were to make punishments more severe, DTO operations would be reduced. While this is a logical assessment, it is not true. When looking at the legality of drugs, it is important to recognize why DTO's transport drugs and why they are violent to protect them. DTO's transport drugs because they are illegal. If the U.S. were to legalize drugs, DTO's would simply move to a different resource. Violence would not be reduced. DTO's would continue to protect their resources. The drug war would simply change to a resource war.

Past the legality, if the U.S. or Mexico targeted DTO leaders directly, it would accomplish little to nothing. Due to the business like structure of DTO's, targeting the kingpin would do nothing but aggravate the entirety of the operation. A new leader would rise up, focus operations greater towards the individuals responsible for eliminating the king pin, and continue daily DTO operations. In order for this tactic to work, more than just the cartel leader would have to be targeted. A large portion of the cartel would have to be eliminated quickly enough to throw the entire DTO into chaos.

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Since legalizing drugs and targeting DTO leaders seem to be poor options, it would stand to reason that the next logical step would be to make domestic punishments more severe in the U.S. and in Mexico. While there is a certain amount of truth in this idea, there is a fundamental misconception behind it. The reason drugs are pulling in revenue is because they are illegal. If government bodies made punishment more severe, they would simply be driving the price of drugs up because drugs would have a greater demand. In driving the price of drugs up, DTO's will bring in more revenue and possibly fund more terror based organizations elsewhere.

It is obvious that DTO's pose a great threat to the U.S. More so, it is obvious that certain public ideas for wage the drug war are not sound strategies. What is the best course of action to take? Three possible courses of action to take are to place DTO's into the same category as terror based organizations and combat them accordingly, combat DTO's in an unconventional method, and attack DTO's revenue.

Recategorizing drug trafficking organizations

There is much discussion around changing the perspective of DTO's from organized crime to terrorist organization. Currently DTO's are considered to be criminal organizations (Clapper, 2014). According to the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, international terrorism:

Involve[s] violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law; Appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and; Occur primarily outside the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S., or transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear intended to intimidate or coerce, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum (FBI, 2014).

Additionally, domestic terrorism:

Involve[s] acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law; appear intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and; Occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S. (FBI, 2014).

DTO operations do not specifically breach these boundaries. However, the collateral violence and funding of third party organizations could be enough to reclassify DTO's as terrorist organizations. If DTO's were recategorized as terrorist organizations, it would change the jurisdiction and dedication of resources within the U.S. With the change of jurisdiction and reallocation of resources, the U.S. could more effectively combat the DTO situation.

While this idea is logical in theory, there is a fundamental flaw. The majority of DTO operations are rooted in countries outside of the U.S. If DTO's were to be categorized as terrorist organizations by the U.S., it would simply irritate the problem on the surface because the U.S. would be bound by its own jurisdiction. The U.S. would not be able to extend operations outside of its borders without permission from other governing bodies. DTO's would simply increase

operations and strike harder outside of the U.S. While it could be said that one side will break eventually, recategorizing DTO's as terrorist organizations will simply touch the problem at the surface.

For this strategy to work, the U.S. would have to be very aggressive in directly targeting DTO personnel, destroying DTO resources, and taking counter measures against DTO's (provided they were given jurisdiction within the DTO home country). In essence, the U.S. would have to make DTO operations no longer profitable due to the risk of being a drug runner. It is highly unlikely that the U.S. would adopt a strategy like this because it is against current national defense policy and the U.S. will gain little. As improbable as this strategy is, it would still be an effective strategy if executed in a swift and fierce fashion.

Combating drug trafficking organizations unconventionally

One action that is not discussed very often is the use of unconventional forces against DTO's. The U.S. Army defines unconventional warfare (UW) as, "Operations conducted by, with, or through irregular forces in support of a resistance movement, an insurgency, or conventional military operations (U.S. Army, 2008)." There are many ways unconventional warfare could be implemented in the drug war. One way would involve recruiting U.S. citizens to fight the drug war on U.S. soil. While there is a certain constituency that would be very supportive to this proposition, this is a highly improbable course of action. For unconventional techniques to be effective, the constituency must be ready to take actions against the opposition. There are few instances where U.S. citizens are taking the drug war in their own hands and directly targeting cartel members.

While U.S. citizens are not a solid option, Mexican citizens are a strong base for an unconventional force. Mexican citizens are forming militias in certain regions to combat drug cartel operations due to the lack of apparent government intervention. In the Michoacan region of Mexico, militias are a strong opposing force to cartels (Stratfor, 2014). Militias are rising all over Mexico, both under the support of and separate from the Mexican government (RT, 2014). It is obvious that the general public in Mexico is ready to take action against cartels.

It is possible that the Mexican militias could be used as an unconventional force. This force could be trained by the U.S. or Mexico and supplied accordingly. The end product would be a professionally trained militia that is fighting for their very livelihood and families. The militia groups would be a dangerous and highly effective force.

While this option is probably the most effective and strategic option in combating the drug war, it is also the most dangerous. In professionally training a civilian militia, a civilian force would be able to strike against any opposing force and expect to win. This could be detrimental for the Mexican government. The Mexican government may create a power vacuum in which the general public will rely on each other rather than the national government. A shift in public confidence could lead to a civil conflict in which the Mexican government would have trained and supplied the opposing force.

Hitting drug trafficking organizations in their wallets

A less direct strategy involves catching DTO revenue. The business like structure of DTO's has been mentioned a few times at this point. Cartels handle a massive amount of

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currency within their operations, forcing them to move their revenue in strategic ways so that they are not tied to drug money.

Steps are already being taken by the U.S. and other countries to connect DTO's to bank accounts and connect specific personnel with the drug operations. These strategies are working well. One possible improvement is for more personnel to work on connecting DTO personnel to drug money. It is important that personnel not be limited to executive/plaza/or regional leaders, but that all personnel be connected to drug funds.

Another possible improvement is to increase the amount of embedded personnel within DTO's to connect funds to personnel. In other words, train businessmen to go undercover and convict DTO operatives. There are two sides to this strategy. On the negative side, it would take years of training, surveillance, and a very careful operative. On the positive side, many personnel could be convicted and less people would be involved with the direct operations, thus potentially lowering the violence surrounding DTO's. While this strategy seems like a sound strategy, the retaliatory violence and lost intelligence if an undercover accountant was caught could be detrimental. More so, it would be very difficult to get a mole to embed in a specific cartel, at a specific time, in a specific position.

This strategy would be effective in supporting another strategy, but would not be effective as a primary strategy. Efforts should be increased in tying DTO personnel to drug money, but it should not be the primary method of combating DTO's due to the time and resources involved.

Conclusion

The drug war is not something to overlook. Most cartels operate in a business like fashion in which they transport logistics supplied by third parties. This is a threat to the U.S. and Mexico because of the collateral violence associated with DTO operations, the breached US/Mexican national border, and the funding of DTO's and third party organizations.

Due to the threat of DTO's, many people assume that certain actions can be taken. First, it was suggested that the U.S. and Mexico legalize drugs. This will create a situation where DTO's will move to another resource. Second, it was suggested that DTO leaders be targeted specifically, thus causing the DTO to spiral into chaos. The issue with this argument is that DTO's operate in a business like structure that plans for a quick and seamless change of command. For this to work, a large portion of DTO leaders would have to be removed at once. Third, it was suggested that domestic punishments be made more severe stateside and in Mexico. The issue with this argument is that drugs are illegal to begin with. Increased punishment will simply drive up the price of drugs, thus potentially funding DTO's and third parties more.

In addition to the faulty strategies listed above, less commonly discussed strategies were placed forward. First, it was suggested that DTO's be recategorized as terrorist organizations. This would create a situation where the U.S. and Mexico could dedicate more resources to fighting the drug war and operate under a different kind of jurisdiction, and while this is the most dramatic and violent option, it is highly unlikely due to its drastic and extreme nature.

Second, it was suggested that the U.S. and Mexico combat DTO's in an unconventional method. It was suggested that militias form, be professionally trained, and supplied directly to combat DTO's on the militia's turf. This is probably the most effective but dangerous strategy listed. Forming militia groups could be dangerous because it could create a sense of independence from the Mexican government.

Lastly, it was suggested that DTO's be targeted by their funds. This is a solid strategy in which agencies spend more time and resources tracking DTO revenue from the inside and out. It was also suggested that governing institutions spend more resources in embedding personnel within DTO's to track revenue directly. While this is a strong strategy, it is both time consuming and resource intensive. It is suggested that this strategy be implemented beside another strategy.

In conclusion, the drug war cannot be fought using a single tactic nor by a single country. At the end of the day, targeting DTO revenue, fighting DTO's in an unconventional method, and increasing government intervention both stateside and internationally are the best courses of action to take in winning this conflict. For these strategies to work, the U.S. and Mexico would have to find a common agreement and unify in fighting the drug war. If the U.S. and Mexico continue fighting the drug war the way they are, it is likely that DTO's will become a threat that will not only affect the North and South American continents, but the world as a whole.

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