Hemispheric Perspectives: 
Transnational Crime in the Western Hemisphere

A Colloquium Co-Hosted by The George Washington University Center for Latin American Issues and The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College

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Summary

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On October 24, 2006, The Center for Latin American Issues at The George Washington University (CLAI) and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College held the second in a series of jointly-hosted colloquiums dealing with hemispheric perspectives on Latin American issues. The conference titled “Transnational Security Threats,” brought together over 100 attendees who listened and engaged in dialogue with the panel of experts. The featured speaker was Max Manwaring, Research Professor of National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute. Panelists Luis Bitencourt, Professor of National Security Affairs at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, and Dan Erikson, Senior Associate for U.S. Policy at the Inter-American Dialogue (see speaker biographies, attached), presented their thoughts and comments in response to the main speaker’s paper. After their formal remarks, the panelists responded to points raised by the discussion and then to questions from the audience. The main points at issue were the rise of Transnational Criminal Organizations and the circumstances of their development and increasing grasp of power within their native states. The presenters agreed that criminal organizations and their use of coercion and street violence are the primary security threats to the Caribbean and Latin American states. The actions of criminal organizations are

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largely local, but their reach is increasingly international. This combination requires a unique approach, with the utilization of local police forces as well as international collaboration that calls for an intensive exchange of intelligence between national militaries and police forces.

Development

Transnational criminal organizations stem from multiple sources. The presenters propounded the idea of a multi-tiered system of causation, listing sources such as socio-economic disparity, poor health-care and education systems, and ineffective governance that, taken together, lead to ideal spawning grounds for these criminal groups. Dr. Manwaring presented an analytical framework consisting of a three-tiered development process: from a local gang --familiar to those from the 1930s, with strong local influence but not much exchange and influence outside of these areas-- to a second tier that is better developed, and which has created linkages with transnational organizations and can coerce without using direct means, e.g., by using political graft. The third level of development can be exemplified by the FARC in Colombia or possibly the Jamaican “posses” that are a threat to that island. In fact, this level of development leads to the creation of a state within a state. Cultivating the development of international criminal organizations is the rise of globalization and the establishment of technologies that have decreased the overall cost of transportation and communication. A fear is that the United States, with its policy of deporting criminals to their countries of origins, is serving as a revolving door for criminal gangs. It is possible that this policy is in fact fine-tuning these criminal organizations by placing them in corrupt prison systems that exacerbate the situation. In Brazil, criminal organizations are able to run their illicit empires from within prisons.
because of their access to cellular telephones and the connections developed within the slum communities of Sao Paulo and other municipalities.

Problems

Transnational criminal organizations threaten the security and sovereignty of Latin American nations. They seek control of territory and wealth. Regardless of motives, these criminal organizations have implicit and explicit political agendas. The problem with waiting for the explicit manifestation of these goals is that it is already too late by the time these objectives are evident. Transnational criminal organizations seek either to control or to take down the government, preferring to control the institutions, as it is most cost-efficient to control existing institutions as opposed to creating new ones. As the objective of these organizations is primarily to ensure the survival and success of their business, they have a large margin to work within to pursue and secure these goals.

According to a 1999 Inter-American Development Bank report, criminal organizations are costing 14.2% of the Latin American region’s GDP. By replacing state agencies that are either incompetent or corrupt, these organizations, e.g. the Jamaican “posses,” are able to provide social goods such as police and welfare services. The issue here is that by replacing state agencies, these organizations are free to use coercion and violence to intimidate and gain tighter control of public assets. The connection between failed states and criminal organizations is directly related to the lack of an infrastructure to fight the escalating problem.

Resolution

Despite the dour tone of the issues presented, there are positive aspects that provide hope for long-term stability in the region. Good things are happening, with nations doing better
economically in recent years, and with democracy taking root in most Latin American nations. The speakers shared the concern that efforts so far by the international community to resolve the issue of exported crime have been ineffective, and that now there must be a rethinking of how to approach the issue. There was debate on the merits of a holistic approach, given that despite the criminal activity’s international nature, the effect is local. As such, the response must begin with local police forces being equipped to deal with criminal organizations that do not respect national boundaries. The United States has been speaking past Latin America. The U.S.’s primary concern is its global war on terror, while Latin America has been principally concerned by crime and violence on the street. The United States must act, but without provoking a negative reaction. The response of the international community must be on a strategic, not just a tactical, plane and it must be a holistic approach which includes every aspect of anti-crime activity, including increased intelligence sharing among all national and international intelligence communities.