

IN DEPTH

Toward a Mexicanization of the war

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A Mexican colleague asked me what the difference was between Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers. My answer, he later told me, was the same as that which he had heard from other Colombian students of the issue. In Mexico, drug traffickers have never had to face the threat of powerful guerrillas. As a result, they never had to assemble irregular armies to survive. It was enough to have bodyguards and bandits to make war. In contrast, Colombian drug traffickers from very early on had to learn the art of controlling territory through widespread bloodshed.

At war since the beginning

In the early 1980s, the different guerilla groups in Colombia took advantage of the availability of new resources to expand their geographical presence. These resources came from criminal activities, mainly kidnapping and extortion. The victims were business owners, landowners, store owners and anyone who had anything of value in the areas where the guerrillas operated. Very quickly drug traffickers also became victims. They were very desirable targets because if anyone had money in these areas, they did. What the guerrillas did not foresee was that the drug traffickers not only had resources to defend themselves but that they would do so. They quickly assembled paramilitary armies and even co-opted paramilitary groups of peasants, ranchers and rural notables who did not have the resources or the desire to get involved in a brutal war.

The great paradox was that the guerrillas were receiving large payments from the drug traffickers to guard their cocaine labs in the remote jungles in the southern part of the

country, while in the north their paramilitary armies were at war. In the 1990s when Colombia became the largest producer of coca leaves in the world, the situation was even more ironic. The guerrillas were protecting the coca farmers, while paramilitary armies were protecting the drug traffickers, who were buying the coca from the farmers to transform it into cocaine and sell it in the international market. Drugs could move between enemies, but control over territory was not negotiable. In this way, the drug war has always been a fight to the death between enemies who one way or another are connected to the same business. Not only have the drug traffickers been protected by guerrillas, paramilitaries and mafias, but they have also built extensive networks of illegal protection with the state. There is substantial documentation on how drug traffickers financed several presidential campaigns, not to mention the alliances between government, paramilitary groups and the traffickers.

“ The war has always been a fight to the death between enemies. Not only have the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and mafias protected the drug traffickers, within the state itself they have built up extensive networks of illegal protection. ”

Violence under control

At the same time, in Mexico, the violence of the drug cartels was nothing more than a criminal matter; there were no wars as such, but rather vendettas. The PRI regime punished any form of dissent. Even the drug traffickers had to submit to the authority of the political class and the PRI. It was formal political power that decided who controlled drug dealing in the squares in the cities and towns, and if a drug trafficker did not comply with the established rules, he would be eliminated by the security apparatus of the state. One of these rules was precisely to keep levels of violence down so as not to affect the broader population.

When the PRI regime lost power at the turn of the century, the mechanisms of state control over drug traffickers relaxed. The price of democratization in Mexico was an increase in violence. The new politicians who came to power in peripheral states and municipalities found that they did not have the backing of the security agencies at the central level to prevent the cartels from imposing their authority. The channels of communication between the centre and the periphery expeditiously brokered by a single party government were lost with the end of the hegemony of the PRI. Municipal police were no competition for the drug traffickers' new war apparatus. Moreover, despite democratization, corruption continued to be part of the political landscape. Mayors and governors continued to receive bribes from drug traffickers, with the added problem that they no longer had any power over them.

Colombianization?

With drug traffickers monopolizing power in local areas, either through co-opting local authorities or the use of paramilitary forces, it did not take long for the violence of the cartels to affect the populations under their control. Vendettas turned into wars and attacks against enemy factions inevitably led to civilian victims. In addition, the cartels used media coverage of their cruelty and violence to terrorize the social base of their enemy. Decapitated bodies, bodies hung from bridges, and videos of massacres became part of the new repertoire of violence. As a result, talk of the Colombianization of Mexico began.

However, despite the comparison, the Mexican cartels have never escalated the war to the systematic and indiscriminate use of assassinations and terrorism as did Pablo Escobar. Nor have they acquired a military capacity close to that of the paramilitary chiefs that controlled the drug trade in Colombia after the fall of the Cali Cartel. They have never needed such military organization for the use of violence because they have never confronted an enemy, the guerrillas, with such an ambitious political objective: seizing national power. The goal of the guerrillas in Colombia is what has determined the substantial difference in the scale of the organization of violence, given that it necessitated the construction of a regular army with the capacity to fight the state for territorial control.

Colombian drug traffickers in response to this threat had to assemble similar powerful armies in order not to be defeated in the confrontation. The nature of the threat also facilitated building alliances with sectors of the state and legal elites. The motives for doing so went beyond pure corruption. What was at stake was their own survival and the maintenance of the social order in the peripheral areas where the guerrillas were making advances as part of their strategy to take power.

While fighting for territorial control in Mexico is now part of the objectives of the Mexican cartels, their operating logic follows the actions typical of criminal forms of domination. The cartels specialize in the control of social transactions and peripheral regions that are outside the reach and even the interest of state institutions. Wars are carried out with hit-men and bodyguards whose function is to monitor and regulate disputed regions in order to ensure the production of criminal income. There is no threat from large armies that requires them to have a real military capacity in these areas. They are simpler conflicts. A typical attack consists of an incursion into a territory to eliminate 'falcons' (the 'eyes and ears' of the streets), hit-men and other operatives of an enemy cartel. In this way, the enemy is unable to protect their plazas (turf), and the attacking organization is able to deploy their own falcons and hit-men in the area.

“ The Mexican form of warfare is what is now taking place in Colombia as a result of the weakening of the guerrillas and the developing peace process with the FARC. ”

The political objective of the Mexican cartels – to control peripheral populations in order to extract income generated there – is not as complex as the objective of the guerrillas. For the rank and file bandits who monitor and control a territory, this income comes from a series of local activities, which range from the retail sale of drugs to extorting legal local businesses. But this income is just crumbs when compared to the spoils of a cartel that takes control of a turf and then delegates its control to its rank and file: the

use of the territory for international drug trafficking. This is where the fortunes of the war come from.

It is more a Mexicanization

The paradox is that this “Mexican” form of warfare is what is currently occurring in Colombia as a result of the weakening of the guerrillas and the peace process with the FARC. The heirs of the paramilitaries are organizations that delegate the control of the extraction of lesser income in a given territory to local bandits. In return, they profit from the territorial franchise given to the street criminals. It is from there where the drugs are produced and transported and then sent to international markets.

Thus, we are quietly witnessing the Mexicanization of Colombia. Just as Chapo Guzman and Mayo Zumbada can control half of the drug trafficking in Mexico from one of its most remote regions, the mountains of Sinaloa, peasants from Urabá in Colombia can do the same from the jungles of Darién. Today the Urabeños’ control, through their delegation of power to local criminal gangs, Buenaventura, La Guajira, La Llanos, the historical areas of the Medellin cartel and they even venture into the territory of the Rastrojos in the north of El Valle.

Without the threat of the guerrillas, the humble people of Urabá have learned from the Mexicans an effective and profitable way of controlling territories for international drug trafficking.

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