MERIDA INITIATIVE AND US-MEXICO MILITARY COOPERATION:

ARMED FORCES AGAINST DRUG TRAFFICKING: THE BLURRED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN NATIONAL SECURITY AND PUBLIC SECURITY

Yadira Gálvez Salvador

National Autonomous University of Mexico

First Draft
Comments welcome
Please, do not quote without authorization from the author

Paper to be delivered at the FLACSO-ISA Joint International Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 2014.

MERIDA INITIATIVE AND US-MEXICO MILITARY COOPERATION
INTRODUCTION

The use of the armed forces to struggle drug trafficking has a long history in Mexico. However, the participation of the military in these tasks has been transformed from marginal and restricted activities, in support of the civil authorities (such as drug crops eradication and drug interdiction) to take a central role in the strategy to combat criminal organizations.

Since the Declaration of the "war on drugs" of former President Felipe Calderón, to the present day, the armed forces have participated in missions that blurred the boundaries between national security and public security. On the one hand, the military have been responsible for important captures or deaths of top leaders of criminal organizations, as for example, the death of Arturo Beltran Leyva in 2009 or the recent capture of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, leader of the Sinaloa cartel. On the other hand, the armed forces have been deployed to respond to the citizen’s demands for public security, performance activities in this field, which includes street patrols and permanent presence. The argument that justifies this intervention is that the military are collaborating with civil and police authorities in the preservation of internal order and comply with its constitutional duties of protecting the internal security of the nation.

This paper examines how the progressive participation of the military in combating drug trafficking in Mexico, has blurred the boundaries between national security and public security. Not only because the tasks of the military have been extended, but specially because their presence on the ground of public security is becoming more
recurrrent due to the inability of the police and civil institutions for guarantee it.

To meet this objective the essay is divided into three sections. The impact of drug trafficking on public security and national security will be addressed first. The second section will analyze the participation of the armed forces in actions against drug trafficking and its progressive expansion towards activities of public security to the point that practically replace civil authorities in some localities of the country. Finally, the consequences of this situation in terms of civil-military relations will be discussed.

1. The Drug Trafficking in the Public Security and National Security Agendas.

Transnational organized crime\(^1\) has emerged as one of the main threats to national and international security. We can define drug trafficking, as “an actions that include the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, sale and control of illicit drug markets”, among other activities of transnational organized crime, it is distinguished by:

a) Their economic earnings, which are estimated at about 320,000 million dollars a year, making them the most profitable business for organized crime. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [UNODC], 2012).

b) Their social and economic influence, that reach becomes a way of life that allows certain social groups to develop a productive activity and its rise in the social and economic scale (Astorga, 1995:35-37).

c) Corruption and the development of "public functions", which includes the opportunity to generate an illegal system alternating to the State, which develop its own logic (Serrano, 2005).

d) The use of violence against individuals and groups to ensure its influence on Governments and societies; and

\(^1\) According to the UN Convention, a transnational crime group is one comprising three or more members who are organized for a set period of time before and after they act in a coordinated manner to commit a ‘serious crime’ or the purpose of obtaining financial or other benefit.
e) The co-optation of institutions and Governments in order to preserve their business and ensure their profits.

This is also a phenomenon that threatens security in all aspects:

- Human, by their effects in terms of public health and welfare, violent deaths and perception of insecurity.
- Public, because that undermines the rule of law, as well as the cohesion and social relations.
- National, since crime groups are not only contributing to the decline of sovereignty as the central ordering principle for world politics, but also directly challenging the authority of states. Transnational organized crime can also undermine the social, economic, political and military components of state power.
- International, by challenging the norms and international institutions, collaborate with terrorists or guerrillas, smuggle arms or take advantage of the gaps of power in certain States for their operation. (Picarelli, 2008: 454).

The impact of drug trafficking on national security is directly related to the capabilities that the States have to tackle this threat (police, rule of law, law enforcement); but also with the capacity of the drug trafficking organizations to affect certain dimensions of the existence of the State, through territorial control, corruption, its infiltration into the institutions, the confrontation with the authorities or even through the extreme violence and its effects in terms of social harmony.

During almost the entire twentieth century Mexico remained a producer of narcotics (primarily marijuana and heroin); and a transit country for Colombian cocaine to the United States. Several studies have examined the relationship between the government (the PRI regimes) and the drug traffickers. As Luis Astorga has pointed out the drug trafficking was related and subordinate to political power, which meant
the effective control of the levels of violence (under its subordination) and its formal exclusion of politics. (Astorga, 2005;1995). The results are well known: weakening of the rule of law and the development of a parallel economy and culture in which the drug trafficking played the role of "public servant" to provide jobs, provide services and benefits to some communities (Astorga, 2005, 1995; Serrano, 2007).

There is no doubt, that the Mexico-US neighborhood has determined both the development of criminal organizations such as the responses of the Mexican authorities to this threat. Following the international tendency, driven by the United States, Mexican governments officially adopted the punitive-enforced approach of the combat drug trafficking, they ratified UN Conventions on Drugs and, responding to Washington demands, deployed plans for the drug crops eradication. The Canador Plan (1966) and the Condor Operation (1977) counted on the participation of the Armed Forces to support civil authorities.

The development of Mexican criminal organizations and their transformation into a real threat to national security, is explained by the convergence of various factors in the 1980s and 1990s:

- The PRI regime began to lose ability to cope/control criminal organizations and the first political fractures occurred between the PRI regime and drug traffickers. (Astorga, 2005).
- As a result of the kidnapping and murder of Enrique Camarena (DEA agent) and the growth of drug abuse in the United States, the US government increased pressures on Mexico to implement stronger measures against drug trafficking. The capture of leaders like Miguel Angel Caro Quintero and Felix Gallardo took place in this context.
- As a result of the South Florida Operation (1983), Mexico became the principal route to transport Colombian cocaine to United States. The disarticulation of the cartels of Medellin and Cali; and the success of the Plan Colombia years
latter, make possible the expansion and consolidation of the Mexican criminal organizations.

Since 1982, drug trafficking has been identified as a national security concern. The administrations of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) promoted the development of new security institutions to respond to this challenge. Among these, the establishment of the National Center for Planning and Drugs Control (Centro Nacional de Planeación y Control de Drogas, in Spanish) in the Salinas government; and the "new institutional design in public security," launched during the Zedillo administration which included the establishment of the National Public Security System (1994); the Federal Preventive Police (1999) and the Federal Secretariat of Public Security (2000).

However, in 2003 confrontation between criminal organizations became evident with the struggle for routes and territories, its expansion into other crimes, the rise of domestic drug market and ascent of so-called "fourth generation” drug-leaders characterized by their extreme violence.

When Felipe Calderon took office in December 2006 the crisis of insecurity was more than evident: drug trafficking controlled some territories of the country, the cartels maintain an open fight for the control of the trafficking routes resulting in unprecedented levels of violence; the flow of drugs smuggled into the United States trough Mexico was stable and criminal organizations outnumbered police (municipal, state and federal) in terms of organizational capacity, fire and violence.

With the Declaration of "war on drugs" President Calderon securitized drug trafficking, identified it (and the transnational organized groups behind this) as existential threat to the State. With the identification of an enemy, securitization leads to the traditional logic of security: the logic of war against enemies: the reason of state. (Buzan & Hansen, 2009:214; Waever, 1995). Thus, the military was deployed in order to protect national security and additionally, Mexico and US launched the
Merida Initiative, as the most ambitious bilateral cooperation program. (Chanona, 2013; 2009).

2. **Mexican Armed Forces against Drug Trafficking**

Historically the Mexican Armed Forces have executed missions to support national development (such as reforestation, education or health). We must also point out their activities in the field of internal security (combating drug-trafficking and activities against the guerrillas and radical groups); as well as support for the population in case of natural disasters. In sum, the internal missions have determined the Organization and deployment of the Mexican Armed Forces (Benitez, 2008:50).

Another Mexican particularity lies in the existence of two military ministries: the Ministry of National Defense (SEDENA) comprising the army and air force and the Ministry of Navy (SEMAR) corresponding to the navy. The differences between the two institutions are evident in terms of number of members, budget, activities and doctrines.

In theory, since the 1970s has been argued that military workplace is in "support" to the authorities and with "transitional" character, while the institutions to deal with this threat are established or recomposed. In practice, there has been a greater involvement of the military in the fight against drug trafficking and in the containment of violence, including the enlargement of its activities to public security.

As of the 1990s, drug trafficking, fighting crime and counterinsurgency have become the three main internal missions of the Armed Forces. he Airmobile Special Forces Groups (GAFES) were created and the National Institute to Combat Drugs was established in 1992. Finally under Zedillo administration (1994-2000), the military participation in the National Council of Public Security was institutionalized (Chabat, 2010: 27).
This tendency was reinforced during the Fox administration (2000-2006): the democratic transition deepened the use of military force in public security and left unaffected issues related with the democratic conduction and civilian control of the armed forces.

Between 2006-2008 the use of military in public security tasks has increased by sixty-eight percent. (Acosta, 2011). According to the official information, the monthly average of the soldiers (SEDENA), participating in combat to drug trafficking operations in 2012 amounted to 49,000 and 7,405 of the navy (Presidency of the Republic, 2012: 46).

In terms of activities, we can identify those "in support to civil authorities" as drugs crop eradication and interdiction of narcotics, including operations against the leaders of criminal organizations and the development of intelligence activities; as well as increased international cooperation to combat drug trafficking. In other words, activities related to national security issues.

On the other hand, under the logic to protect internal security the Joint Operations (inter-agency) have been launched. These activities have contributed to the blurring of the boundaries between internal security and public security. This as the many missions that are implemented under these operations can be placed in a "gray zone" between internal security and public safety.

Finally, the incorporation of military to polices corps: to the federal police (either as base elements for the formation of new institutions or in front of them); to the municipal police and their participation as heads of the local Public Security Offices.

2.1. National Security Activities
In 2006 the SEDENA assumed the responsibility of performing the operations of drug eradication. The so-called “High Impact Operations” are oriented towards narcotics eradication and interdiction. As we can see in table 1, these operations went from 23 in 2006-2007 to 36 in September 2012-June 2012.

Moreover, it is important to point out that, under Peña Nieto’s administration the security strategy refers to "Precision Operations" in order to emphasize the importance of the use of intelligence and the deployment of more efficient actions that contribute to the reduction of violence. In this context, the number of the military dedicated to combating organized crime and violence in the country has reduced to 32,000 (Castillo, 2014).

Table 1
“High Impact Operations, Naval Operations and number of elements”

2.2. From Internal Security to Public Security

Deployed in coordination with other federal agencies as Federal Police, joint operations responded to the need to restore security and ensure the presence of the State in communities seriously affected by the violence.

The first large-scale intervention against a drug-trafficking organization was launched in December 2006 in Michoacán (a state where violence had reached unprecedented levels during the previous months) only a few days after the beginning of the administration. This first “joint operation” was launched in response to an explicit request by Michoacán’s governor, and rendered good short-term results. During 2007 and 2008, however, the Federal Government launched seven additional large-scale Joint Operations. Over the years these operations have expanded to 18 states of Mexico. (See Table 2) However, these operations were criticized for his hard
approach and for its poor results in terms of improve citizen’s security. among other criticisms we can address:

a) The increase of violence and homicides in the places where they were deployed (Merino, 2011);

b) The coordination problems between the agencies involved (distrust and lack of communication)

c) Clashes between corrupt police and military (Ai Camp, 2010: 304); and

d) The implications related to the replacement of local authorities (municipal) by federal security forces.

Michoacán is a clear example of the limits of the hard line “war on drugs” perspective: seven years later, on January 13, 2014, was launched a new security agreement and a reinforced federal operation, to contain the insecurity and governability crises.

Table 2
Joint Operations (about here)

Recognizing the strength and capabilities of the Armed Forces compared to other institutions (local police), local governments have relied on the military to public security tasks. The rise of the military as a heads of the Departments of Public Security is more than clear: in 2011 36% of the directors of the 50 municipalities with more homicides in the country were military, outstanding Acapulco, Chihuahua, Ciudad Juarez, Culiacan and Tijuana (Acosta, 2011). By December 2012, in 14 of the 32 States of the Republic a military the Ministry of Public Security were head by a military. (Lopez, 2013).

In Tamaulipas, in 2009 the Nuevo Laredo customs’ police was replaced by the military and in 2011, 2,790 soldiers were deployed to replace local police in 22 of the 43 municipalities of the state (Castillo, 2011). In other states like Monterrey, Veracruz,
Guerrero and recently the State of Mexico, the Armed Forces are "strengthening" local police. All this activities puts pressure on the military, which have had to adapt their doctrines and develop new skills to combat organized crime, but also common delinquency and deal, at the same time, with issues related to public security.

3. **Merida Initiative and US-Mexico Military Cooperation**

The Merida Initiative was launched in 2007 under the George W. Bush administration, to "support Mexico's law enforcement in the fight against organized crime." The Obama administration revised and expanded Merida's mission, moving from a “heavy” emphasis on military equipment to a more comprehensive bilateral strategy that seeks to reduce the role and influence of organized crime. The Initiative now encompasses four priorities, but military relations between Mexico and US is still one of the main areas of the bilateral cooperation.

US- Mexican Military relations have changed fundamentally in recent years. This has been a consequence of mutually identified threats, outreach programs that have fostered joint understandings, and Mexican military transformation efforts that both countries judge as essential for promoting national and regional security.

Officially the Department of Defense views Mexico as a strategic partner in mutual regional and hemispheric security interests. Both countries are deepening their defense and military partnership in a whole host of areas, including in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cyber security, defense planning, training and education, air and maritime defense and counter-terrorism.

4. **Democratic Governance: Civil-Military Relations**

The interaction between the military and the political system is one of the central issues faced by consolidating democracies in Latin America. The relationship
between the armed forces and civilian government demands significant attention because it plays a major role in the democratization process.

Fortunately, in the case of Mexico, the country's historical experience has been characterized by military subordination to civilian control. Roderic Camp attributes this relationship to a many of factors including Mexico's atypical past history under the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the degree of interpenetration between the Mexican military and civilian leadership, and the Mexican military's view of civil-military relations.

The scholars also describe this relationship as a “pact” between the military and the PRI, where the PRI exchanged institutional autonomy for civilian control over the armed forces and abstention from military intervention in politics. What implication does the decision to use the military to combat drug trafficking have on the consolidation of democratic governance in Mexico?

It is important to note that the Armed Forces are identified within the institutions that generate more confidence in Mexico. Thus, in August 2012, 37% of citizens identified the Army as an “very confident” institution, followed by universities (36%), the Church (36%), the Federal Electoral Institute (20%) and Supreme Court (19%). The data also reveal that the operations against organized crime were losing approval over the course of six years (going from 83% in 2007 to 58% in 2012). However, the approval of the Army's participation in these operations reached 81% in 2012, which meant only two percentage points less than the 83% support in 2007 (Consulta Mitofsky, 2012, apud Center for Social Studies and Public Opinion Chamber of Deputies [CESOP], 2013).

Graphs 1 & 2 "Confidence" about here

Regarding with military subordination to civilian power, an absolute majority believes that the Army "has always been loyal" to civilian governments (51%) or "most of the
time" (39%); while 39% believed that the General who lead the armed forces have shown "total obedience" and 36% "fairly obedience" to civilians. (Excelsior, 2013 ápud CESOP, 2013).

Therefore, it is assumed that civilian control is guaranteed in Mexico, due the military respect to the chain of command (President as Supreme Commander). However, defending internal security is a broad and ambiguous mission that gives the Mexican military substantial freedom. This increased their historical institutional autonomy.

The armed forces are actively involved in decision-making process, the design of the strategy and are largely autonomous in terms of organization and budget. These “freedoms” are related to the historical relationship between political and military power in Mexico. The military enjoys greater degrees of autonomy in terms of the definition and implementation of internal security operations and public safety. Thus, as heads of the Ministry of Defence and SEMAR, participating in the National Security Council, the National Council of Public Security and the National Civil Protection System. Also in the Interagency Coordination Group for the Prevention and Control of Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition and Explosives (GC-Arms).

**Conclusions**

The Mexican case is enlightening regarding the use of the Armed Forces in the fight against organized crime. For two decades the Mexican authorities have said that the intervention of the military in these task is "transitional". However, the reality is the opposite: civilians have failed in their efforts to strengthen the bodies responsible for public security and pursue a fundamental reform in the system of administration of justice.

Mexico is a clear example of how the military institutions are becoming increasingly important in terms of internal security and public safety, to the inability of civilian bodies to address these threats. Thus, the use of the military in public security was a gradual process that responded to the state's need to fill gaps in the police forces.
Sources

1. Bibliography


Alvarado, A. (2009), La policía, los militares, el sistema de seguridad pública y la administración de la coacción: México frente a América Latina, El Cotidiano, 153, pp. 63-72.


2. Digital Resources


3. Other sources:


Chanona, A. (2013, 04 de junio), “Perspectivas de la agenda de seguridad México-Estados Unidos. ¿Qué sigue más allá de Mérida?”. Paper delivered in the
framework if Panels: Regional Security: Opportunities and Challenges, Ciudad Universitaria.

