

State vs. Street (Part II)

Strategic Implications of Criminal Insurgencies in Latin America

Jahangir E. Arasli

Military Dimension: Unintended Consequences of the “War on Crime”

The governments of the Latin American states generally prefer to respond to the challenge of organized crime (OC) with the use of hard power. The size of the criminal networks and the scope of their activities often require resorting to the active use of regular military forces beyond law enforcement agencies. Mexico started to use its army against cartels as early as 2006. The same practice is common in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Central American states. However, the “militarization” of the fight against organized crime is generating several unintended consequences.

First, the “wars on drugs” led to a compelled expansion of the national defense and security domains. For instance, Mexico has 216,000 service members in the regular armed forces, in addition to 136,000 in the National Guard, the Federal Police, and the Rural Defense Militia (according to the 2023 edition of *Military Balance*). Taking into account the municipal police, the Mexican pool of military and paramilitary forces exceeds 770,000 people. Ecuador plans to expand its armed forces from 40,000 to 70,000 in the next few years. That trend places substantial pressure on national budgets, diverting money from the socio-economic sphere.

Second, the “war on crime” (a part of which is the “war on drugs”) corrupts part of the military and police personnel, and many “watchdogs” are turning into “wolves.” As early as the 1990s, members of the elite paratrooper unit of the Mexican Army, established purposefully to fight the cartels, defected, and founded their own criminal organization,

Jahangir E. Arasli is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a former Adviser on International Issues in the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, who may be contacted at jahangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk.

known as the *Zetas*. In the same pattern, ex-members of the special operations wing of the Guatemalan Army joined the criminal outfits, where they were treated as valuable professional assets. The partial resizing of the Colombian military forces after the peace deal between the government and the FARC leftist movement, discharged thousands of experienced soldiers, many of whom were recruited to DTOs. It is sufficient to note that hundreds of the demobilized Colombians are currently fighting on both sides of the war in Ukraine and even in Yemen in the ranks of private military companies.

Third, the excessive authority given to the military forces may precipitate abuses of power and large-scale violations of human rights. In the recent crisis in Ecuador, the government declared a state of “internal armed conflict” and officially granted uniformed personnel impunity in acting against insurrected gang members. Such an exemption from the law reportedly led to extrajudicial executions. Javier Milei, the recently elected president of Argentina, contemplates an amendment to legislation that would enable the use of the armed forces for “internal security duties”—a practice that was canceled in the aftermath of the “dirty war.” In Brazil, active and retired military, police, and prison guards members who conduct informal paramilitary campaigns against narcotics are also engaged in the racketeering of businesses at the same time.

The “militarization” of states’ anti-criminal response and its perception of the fight against drugs and crime as constituting a “war” raises the following question: is it possible that the empowered military establishments could relapse to Praetorianism and interventions into politics, as was the case before the 1980s-1990s democratization wave?

The answer to this question is generally “no,” due to the altered historical context. The Latin American militaries and their identities and cultures have evolved in the past three decades, particularly due to institutionalized civil-military relations. The new generation of the officer corps is reluctant to meddle directly in internal political affairs and stays focused on outward-oriented missions (i.e., national defense, peacekeeping, and peace support operations). Unlike in the past, national armies are seen in surveys as the most trusted state institution in most countries of Latin America through their roles in maintaining law and order, civic actions, infrastructure management, disaster relief, and so on. Furthermore, the military establishments have sufficient representation in state institutions and the economy. There were 29 active service generals, admirals, and senior officers in top administrative positions (ministers and their deputies) in Brazil as of 2023. In Ecuador, the military controls the national airline and parts of the oil sector. Even if generals intervened in politics directly, they would do so on the orders of their civilian principals. Although no scenarios should be excluded totally, military-assisted power transitions appear more probable than classical military *coups d'états*.

However, in some extreme cases, the interface between a military-security establishment and organized crime can evolve from a natural antagonism to a perverted symbiosis. Venezuela provides a good example of such a synergetic nexus. The commanding echelon

of all three branches of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela, plus the National Guard, the Bolivarian Militia, and the civilian and military intelligence services, as well as the police reportedly offer protection and support to criminal drug-trafficking networks operating across the interstate border between Colombia and Venezuela. The junior ranks compete for positions on that border to make a fortune from assisting the illicit traffic. The collusion of top brass with narco-barons has reportedly shaped a hybrid military-led criminal organization known as the *Cartel de los Soles* (Cartel of the Suns). Beyond profit, the added benefit for Venezuelan government is the use of criminal gangs to suppress the political opposition.

Strategic Fallout of Organized Crime: Socio-Economic and Political Domino Effects

The phenomenon of Latin American OC produces various formative effects, most of which have a strategic impact across individual nations and the entire region.

First, OC activities upset human security. In the past decades, criminal “wars” have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. The death toll includes not only direct participants from the criminal and government sides but also bystander citizens killed in random drug-induced acts of violence or intentional persecution campaigns. Additional hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced from the areas of active confrontation between the OC outfits and law enforcement forces. The increasing consumption of narcotics in society induces crimes that are more violent and affects public health through the spread of HIV-AIDS and other diseases transmitted through drug injection.

Second, the “war on crime” affects political liberties and human rights and divides societies politically. “Freedom is often the first casualty of war,” as the 1982 Mexican Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Gabriel García Márquez put it. This “war” leads to the abuse of civil rights—not only by criminal perpetrators but also by retaliating government actors. Moreover, the use of the regular army to combat crime builds potential preconditions for the possible return of military establishments to politics.

Third, the existence of OC distorts social structure. The cultivation of coca is an ancient way of life for many indigenous communities living in parts of Latin America, with no alternative opportunities. Another aspect is that criminal elements, most of whom are “foot soldiers,” represent a considerable slice of society; for example, an estimated 30,000 gang members are living in the slums of the city of Guayaquil in Ecuador (total population 2.6 million). At the same time, certain groups of citizens form armed vigilant outfits to combat drug-related activities with the use of force. Such a predisposition divides societies and forms the conditions for civil conflict.

Fourth, OC tends to corrupt virtually all levels of state and politics. Criminal leaders use drug money to “buy” some politicians, administrators, judges, and police officers. The

operationalized shady connections offer a huge force multiplier for organized criminal entities. For instance, in 2012, 139 members of the Colombian parliament were under investigation for their alleged ties to drug cartels, and five departmental governors and 32 deputies have been already convicted. Soon after Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia in 2006 (mainly on his populist promise to legalize coca farming), the “coca lobby,” which was firmly entrenched in the national political system, was able to eject the representative office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency from the country. Nowadays, the cultivation of coca is legal in Bolivia, and although the government formally outlaws the production of cocaine, this country has become the third-largest producer of that narcotic in the world (although it appears that most of its exports reach non-U.S. markets). Recently, Bolivia has brought a request to the United Nations to amend the UN Convention on Narcotics to recognize the legality of the “traditional use” of the coca leaf. In an even more radical manner, Gustavo Petro, the current President of Colombia, explicitly proposed the legalization of cocaine in his address to the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2024.

Fifth, criminal ventures affect the economic and fiscal systems. The narco-drug industry constitutes a de-facto parallel underground economy in Mexico and Colombia. Narcotics-related businesses comprise at least 5 percent of Mexico’s entire GDP. There is no need to say that drug money and other crime-generated revenues are not taxed. Furthermore, the “war on crime” places a huge burden on national budgets, slowing down economic progress and development. For instance, the government of Ecuador has had to increase taxation to expand its pool of military and security forces in the wake of the January 2024 crisis, as noted in the first section of Part II of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief.

Sixth, organized crime’s activity produces adverse environmental effects. The expansion of land for the cultivation of narco-precursor plants results in deforestation, especially in the ecologically sensitive region of Amazonia. The countermeasure practice of aerial fumigation to destroy illegal crops with the use of herbicides brings additional environmental damage.

Seventh, there is also a globalized dimension of the Latin American organized criminal locus, which is deeply integrated into the fabric of transnational organized crime (TNOC). The northern part of South America (known as the “Silver Triangle”) represents one of three “geo-drugs” regions of the world, together with South-East Asia (“Golden Triangle”) and South Asia (“Golden Crescent”). Latin American OC communities maintain transcontinental operational connections with other akin entities worldwide, including the Italian mafia, the Chinese Triads, the Japanese Yakuza, the Russian, Albanian (and other Balkan), West African, and East Mediterranean criminal networks, as well as other TNOC actors. The established connections and logistics are oriented towards the principal drug-demanding markets of North America and Europe. Specifically disturbing is the transatlantic nexus established between cartels and jihadist movements operating in West Africa and the Sahel Belt. According to the UN Office on

Drugs and Crime, at least 13 percent of the global cocaine flows transiting across those particular regions (known as the “West African Cocaine Corridor”), and a share of their proceeds are spent on purchasing weapons and financing terrorist activities. This further aggravates existing armed conflicts in those parts of Africa.

For the United States, the challenge of drug trafficking represents a severe national security problem. According to reports by the National Drugs Intelligence Center of the U.S. Department of Justice (2008) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2010), the annual drug turnover by the Mexican and Colombian DTOs in the American market is between \$18 and \$39 billion. It stands to reason that the numbers have increased in the intervening period. The multiple ensuing effects are grave, especially the proliferation of violent crime: some 16 percent of all homicides in the United States are drug-related, and over 46 percent of prison inmates are convicted for drug offenses (the numbers are for the year 2019). In 2020, 38 people per 100,000 died from opioid and synthetic narcotic overdoses. In addition to narcotics, the criminal networks facilitate flows of illegal transborder migration to the U.S., which exports social instability and generates major political controversy in that country.

Moreover, America’s own “war on drugs” is an extremely costly undertaking. In 2022 alone, the U.S. federal government allocated \$41 billion for those purposes. A considerable share of it is spent to sustain operations in Central and South America and the Caribbean basin that are conducted by the U.S. Armed Forces Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and other government agencies. In particular, most assets of the Fourth Fleet of the U.S. Navy are busy hunting cartels’ “narco-submarines.” An engagement in anti-crime and anti-drug procedures in the Western Hemisphere is diverting significant U.S. resources that could otherwise be used in the context of the unfolding global strategic competition with China. It should be noted that the West’s strategic competitors (e.g., China, Russia, and Iran) are steadily expanding their influence in Latin America.

Countermeasures: Easier Said Than Done

It is possible to identify four generic avenues of approach to the issue of confronting and containing the challenge of organized crime in Latin America. Each of them has its advantages and downsides.

First, the direct application of hard power against OC. This was analyzed in detail in the first section of Part II of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief. The use of force is an unavoidable and quite effective policy option in certain situations. However, the utility of force has its limits and could turn futile or even counterproductive and cause adverse political and social impacts. Hard power can mitigate the effects of organized crime but cannot eradicate it totally due to persistent root causes. An example is the massive securitization campaign in Brazil launched before the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. It

was successful in deterring potential perpetrators and maintaining public order during those particular mass international events, but it was ineffective in weakening, much less in eliminating, OC structures.

Second, the legal and judicial response to the OC challenge. This is an appropriate instrument in states' toolbox, but it has limits and potential flipsides as well. Some governments opt for tightening criminal justice and excessive penalization of crime, applying unconventional solutions. After President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador declared a state of emergency and an uncompromising war against gangs in March 2022, almost 60,000 gang members were netted and incarcerated in detention centers over a nine-month period. Despite certain international criticism of violations of human rights, such a hard-handed policy enjoys support from the mainstream of citizens and fascinates wannabes abroad. Regarding the latter, the example of President Daniel Noboa of Ecuador is useful to highlight: he recently issued a decree to build mega-prisons in the aftermath of the recent criminal mutiny, in an apparent imitation of Bukele's model. The disproportionate application, misuse, or abuse of legal instruments could precipitate consequences contrasting with the desired ends. A reform of courts and the penitentiary-correctional system is an essential pending task that many Latin American countries face.

Third, addressing the root causes of organized crime. This is the most reasonable and perspective-oriented approach, yet it is an exceedingly difficult, costly, and long-lasting track. It encompasses dozens of elements, such as good governance, measured economic reforms, social inclusion and development, consolidation of civil society, and resilient collective and individual human security. The younger generations, which traditionally serve as a primary recruitment source for the criminal underworld, represent a center of gravity and require a calculated youth policy that would envisage ensuring high-quality education and job opportunities. Indigenous communities equally require special attention and support, including the development of infrastructural projects, the allocation of revenues from mining, and investments into regions that depend on the farming of narcotic plants. The engagement of non-governmental organizations, media, public influencers, and the Catholic Church provides additional soft power multipliers. All those components will need to be further embedded into calibrated and coordinated long-standing strategies focused on the fundamental roots of organized crime.

Fourth, greater international cooperation. This is an essential component to containing organized crime. The affected parties should be motivated to engage more than others do. During the January 2024 crisis in Ecuador, for example, five states (Peru, Columbia, Brazil, Argentina, and the U.S.) pledged their backing to stabilize the situation. The U.S. is providing training, technical assistance, and material support to the defense and security domains of many Latin American states, while the European Union contributes financial and humanitarian aid to strengthen anti-criminal capacity. Clearly, more needs to be

done in this domain, although competing foreign policy priorities in other geopolitical theaters suggest that neither Washington nor Brussels will be able to allocate the necessary resources to effectively assist the Latin American states to the combat crime.

The above four counter-crime tracks—the use of force, the legal response, the management of basic root causes, and international cooperation against crime—are interrelated and indivisible. Having said that, it is necessary to admit that there are no universal solutions or magic formulas that can help to completely defeat the strategic challenge posed by organized crime—at least in the foreseeable future.

Synopsis

- A complex interplay of historical, political, socioeconomic, and geocultural elements shapes the phenomenon of organized crime in Latin America.
- That phenomenon denotes one of the gravest strategic challenges for Latin America, in addition to its global adverse impact as a part of the transnational “geo-drugs” system.
- The Latin American criminal locus demonstrates a tendency towards operational adaptation, technological sophistication, horizontal expansion, and magnification of ambitions (which may include a takeover of a state).
- The organized crime malaise weakens a country’s statehood as well as its institutions, divides societies, and impedes the socio-economic development of Latin America’s nations.
- The most perilous aspect of Latin American organized crime activity is that it increasingly operates in the mode of overt insurgency (or insurrection) against states, contrary to the inherently clandestine nature of the criminal underworld.
- The use of hard power by the affected states vis-à-vis organized crime can contain the latter but has limits in its effects; the eradication of OC requires addressing the underlying root causes, including the allocation of sufficient resources over a sustained period of time.
- The potential unintended consequences of the empowerment of the armed forces in combating organized crime could be a recurrence of military interventions into political processes and ensuing restrictions on good governance.
- Latin American OC represents a fraction of the grand worldwide security crisis and should be considered through the prism of the unfolding strategic competition between global powers and confronting geopolitical alliances.

Once upon a time, the 2010 Peruvian Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Mario Vargas Llosa opined that “Latin America seemed to be a land where there only dictators, revolutionaries, catastrophes.” Those times have faded into the past. In the twenty-first century, Latin America has enormous developmental potential in agriculture, the mining and manufacturing industry, the digital economy, renewable energy, and,

foremost, human capital and cultural diversity. Latin America matters to the world, and more than 670 million people living there should see hope and promise for the future, not fear. However, the enduring curse of organized crime hampers progress and causes much harm.

The fight against organized crime in Latin America is habitually perceived and practically implemented through the lens of “war.” Yet, this suggests an eventual “victory” (or defeat) is possible. The bad news is there will not be a V-Day in the “war on crime,” like in the cases of the “war on terror,” the “war on poverty,” and other perpetual fights. Organized crime will not be totally exterminated from the face of the earth—neither in Latin America nor anywhere else. The good news, though, is that it can be contained, marginalized, and minimized to a condition below a major strategic challenge, as it performs now.