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IMPROVING GUATEMALAN DEFENCE FORCES CAPABILITIES TO COMBAT DRUG TRAFFICKING CARTELS

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JCSP 42

Service Paper

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
JCSP 42 – PCEMI 42
2015 – 2016

JCSP SERVICE PAPER – PCEMI ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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Word Count: 2504

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AIM

1. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the threat posed by drug trafficking cartels in the Peten Region of Guatemala where the military presence is minimal and discuss its implications for the Guatemalan military.

INTRODUCTION

2. This paper will take a closer look at the way in which transnational drug cartels exploit air and land gaps along the Guatemala-Mexico border where the presence of law enforcement is scant, or completely absent.¹ It will then examine the sense, command, and act operational functions to highlight shortfalls in Guatemalan military capabilities. Implications for the Guatemalan military will be discussed and recommendations will be provided.

3. Much of rural Guatemala, particularly along the Guatemala-Mexico border, has very little law enforcement presence. This creates gaps for cartels to move drug shipments with very little impediment. The likelihood of any escalation of the current level of violence is low, but the credible threat of an escalation of violence as a result of competing cartels fighting over territory remains the most dangerous scenario.² The Guatemalan military has a constitutional mandate ordering it to protect Guatemala's territorial integrity and sovereignty while supporting allied nations, such as Mexico, in combating transnational threats.³

¹ UNODC. *Transnational Organised Crime in Central American and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: 2012.) p. 21.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ Global Security. *Guatemala*. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/guatemala.htm>. Last Modified 07 November 2011.

DISCUSSION

Drug Cartel Operations

4. Mexican cartels traffic illicit drugs coming from South America, through Central America, into Mexico; eventually shipments make their way into the United States. Once drug shipments make their way into Central America, the absence of law enforcement in the rural countryside of Guatemala is exploited in order to move the shipments to Mexico. Cartels move largely undetected as there is no means of surveillance. As the shipments transit through Central America, the cartels exploit gaps in surveillance, especially in Peten. The significance of Peten is its complex terrain where cartels are able to move under the detection threshold of Guatemala.⁴ For the purpose of this discussion, the Peten Region will be defined as the battlespace.

5. While most of the shipments are moved by land, there are also shipments moved by air and sea. Boats with suspicious cargo are routinely inspected in Guatemalan territorial waters, while the current aerial radar technology can only detect unauthorised flights entering and leaving Guatemalan airspace within the major population centres. Considering that shipments by sea and air remain as credible threats, the fact remains that the most exploited means of transporting shipments is by land.⁵

6. **Implications for the Guatemalan military.** The drug trade poses a national security risk and a threat upon territorial sovereignty since the transnational cartels move from one country to another with total disregard for national borders. Additionally, there is an international obligation on Guatemala to disrupt this drug trade. Consequently, the

⁴ UNODC. *Transnational Organised Crime in Central American and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: 2012.) p. 39-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Guatemalan military must critically review the sense, command, and act operational functions to be able to contribute to countering this national security issue.

Sense Operational Function

7. The sense operational function consists of presenting a commander with information gathered through intelligence gathering systems.⁶ This information can then be used to plan and execute operations based upon recommended Courses of Actions (COAs). Fundamentally, this information provides the commander the elements needed in order to make decisions regarding COA; these decisions may lead to the seizure of drug shipments and subsequent disruption and/or neutralisation of cartels operations.⁷

8. **Sense operational function challenges in countering drug cartels.** The main sense challenges in countering cartel operations include the following:

a. **Airspace surveillance.** Currently, the Guatemalan law enforcement agency and military have limited airspace surveillance capabilities. The absence of radar tracking allows unauthorised aircraft to move unimpeded. Also, the limited aerial reconnaissance aircraft prevents the tracking of cartels' movements throughout the battlespace, particularly along the Guatemala-Mexico border.

b. **Human Intelligence (HUMINT).** The lack of law enforcement and military in the battlespace has limited the establishment of a HUMINT network. As such, the need for eyes and ears on the ground is ever increasing. The cartels' demonstrate an adaptability to exploit the environment because of a lack of informants.

⁶ Department of National Defence, B-GL-300-001/FP-001, *Land Operations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2008), 4-19.

⁷ National Defence Canada. *Canadian Forces Aerospace Doctrine*. B-GA-400-000/FP-000. (Air Force Training and Doctrine Division: 2012) p. 36.

Consequently, the lack of HUMINT capability hinders the Guatemalan military's capability to detect and track cartel movements and operations.

c. **Lack of law enforcement agencies.** The absence of civilian law enforcement agencies in the battlespace is a significant gap that is exploited by the cartels. The PNC is absent along a majority of the boarder. The only law enforcement presence is some of the small towns; however, it is a very small presence and provides little in sense capabilities. Finally, there is very little coordinated effort with the Guatemalan military, or DEA. Consequently, everyone is operating independently and not as part of a coordinated effort.

d. **Signals Intelligence (SIGINT).** There are very limited SIGINT capabilities. The only type of SIGINT available is through the interception of cell phone communications.⁸ This is limited, however, since there is little coverage in the battlespace. Moreover, the lack of law enforcement, or even military, in the battlespace limits the capabilities of intercepting radio communications. The Guatemalan military does not have any capabilities to carry out electronic support operations. The cartels do use radios to communicate and hence these could be susceptible to interception.

e. **Persistent Surveillance.** There are inadequate persistent surveillance systems for monitoring of the battlespace. Currently, this capability is limited to permanent check points; however, these are few and dispersed.

9. **Implications for the Guatemalan Army.** The lack of sense capabilities limits the Guatemalan military's ability to detect and track drug cartel movements and operations,

⁸ UNODC. *Transnational Organised Crime in Central American and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: 2012.) p. 43.

in order to deter, disrupt and ultimately neutralise them. Aerial surveillance such as aircraft, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and, radar technology would enable effective tracking of cartels' movements. Additionally, the purchase and deployment of persistence surveillance systems such as ground surveillance, radars, aerostats, and unattended ground sensors would assist. Finally, the Guatemalan military needs to establish a comprehensive HUMINT network that is supported by greater SIGINT capability. All these capabilities would help to support the commander with information to enable the development of COA.

Command Operational Function

10. The command operational function refers to the integration of all information into one single objective at a strategic, operational, and tactical level. The recommended COAs would allow the commander to make the right decision based upon all available facts, while minimising the use of assumptions.⁹ Through the use of effective command and control (C2), commanders can ensure that objectives are carried out accordingly.¹⁰ The determined battlespace, as identified by the routes and specific points in porous borders will allow the concentration of assets, such as Special Forces, on these particular points. The Guatemalan Army must focus specifically on three points:

11. **Integration.** The command function must be improved to make it more joint and inter-agency. Consequently, this will require the military and law enforcement agencies to improve their relationship and cooperation. Since situational awareness is vitally important, "red force tracking" is essential in monitoring cartels' movements throughout the defined battlespace and this can be achieved through integration.

⁹ National Defence Canada. *Canadian Forces Aerospace Doctrine*. B-GA-400-000/FP-000. (Air Force Training and Doctrine Division: 2012) p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

12. **Communication.** Communication is fundamental in the command function since there is a high level of complexity due to the number of agencies that will come into play. Furthermore, the joint task force that will emerge from this combination of forces and agencies requires that there be clearly defined channels of communication and protocols in order to ensure the flow of information in a timely manner. The use of current radio communications technology such as Harris equipment will enable the free flow of information throughout surveillance missions to the headquarters. In addition, the use of secure internet encryption will allow information to flow back and forth between the task force headquarters and individual agencies without interception by the technologically capable cartels.

13. **Command Structure.** The biggest challenge in this operation is to maintain a functional command structure that minimises confusion and enables orders to get through in a timely fashion. In addition, the intelligence gathered on the adversary needs to be processed accordingly so that the task force commander can be briefed and determined COAs can lead to the Joint Operations Planning Group (JOPG) producing plans that encompass all of the strengths of all agencies and forces whereby the adversary's capabilities can be limited or interrupted.¹¹

14. **Implications for the Guatemalan Army.** The need for the establishment of a joint and interagency headquarters that can centralise the command function into one coordinating body will ensure a proper command and control structure that will enable synthesis of sense information and the rapid deployment of assets into the battlespace. In addition, there is a clear need for effective communications equipment and secure channels in order to minimise the risk of countersurveillance or leaks of information. The

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 36-37.

adoption of a formal command structure is essential in order to eliminate the confusion among agencies and forces so that the JOPG can contribute to the timely execution of the determined COAs.

Act Operational Function

15. The act operational function is the use of available resources in order to achieve the desired end result.¹² The most effective way to counter these threats and limit cartels' capabilities to traffic illicit drugs is a layered approach with a joint and integrated task force. This layered approach involves the use of special forces units at vulnerable border points working alongside civilian law enforcement agencies and international agencies. However, there are important challenges posed by cartels' operations.

a. **Lack of Mobility.** The Guatemalan military currently lacks the capability to facilitate easy and reactive movement within the battlespace. The terrain does not allow much mobility for conventional vehicles.¹³ Therefore, there is a need for specialised vehicles that can tackle the rugged terrain along with increased flight operations – such as tactical helicopters that can place special forces assets within the battlespace, or within a reasonable distance. Increased mobility would allow the Guatemalan military to disrupt cartels' transport logistics.

b. **Increasing fire superiority.** As financial resources become more readily available to cartels, they will focus their profits toward the purchase of high-power weapons. Additionally, they often gain additional weapons after defeating rivalling cartels.¹⁴ In many cases, these weapons are superior to those military

¹² Ibid. p. 38.

¹³ UNODC. *Transnational Organised Crime in Central American and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: 2012.) p. 46.

¹⁴ Ibid.

forces deploy with troops. These include: 7.62mm AK-47 assault rifles, 40mm grenade launchers, .50 calibre machine guns, high-power sniper rifles, explosive grenades, automatic pistols, armoured cars, and claymore landmines.¹⁵ The prevalence of porous borders enables cartels to smuggle weapons back and forth; this ensures a healthy supply chain of weapons and ordnance.¹⁶

c. The lack of fire power. Cartels' increasing fire superiority has made the Guatemalan military's lack of fire power evident. Much of the Guatemalan military's equipment and armament is obsolete. In some cases, it dates back to the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷ Due to the embargo on Guatemala that dates back to 1977, the acquisition of arms and equipment has been limited.¹⁸ In addition, lack of financial resources has put additional strain on its logistics supply chain. That means that the Guatemala military relies heavily on assistance from allied nations.

d. Information operations. Currently, the law enforcement agencies and Guatemalan military have a minimal information operations capability. What does exist is very tactical in nature and not coordinated. This shortfall in capability needs to be addressed.

16. Implications for the Guatemalan Military. The current capability that Guatemala possesses is ineffective in disrupting cartels' operations. In addition to the cartels' increasing fire superiority, Guatemala does not have the capabilities to deter

¹⁵ Beckhusen, Robert. *The Tools of Mexico's Drug Cartels, From Landmines to Monster Trucks*. <http://www.wired.com/2012/11/cartel-weapons/>. Last Modified 30 November 2012.

¹⁶ Latin American Herald Tribune. Mexican Cartels Get Heavy Weapons from Central America, U.S. Cables Say. <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=14091&ArticleId=390473>. Last Modified 25 November 2013.

¹⁷ Global Firepower. *Guatemala Military Strength*. http://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=guatemala. Last Modified 30 November 2014.

¹⁸ Publinews. *Gobierno solicita eliminación de embargo de armas impuesto por EE. UU.* <http://www.publinews.gt/nacionales/gobierno-solicita-eliminacion-de-embargo-de-armas-impuesto-por-ee-uu/bQDmcc---39egKh8QzoACs/>. Last Modified 03 March 2013.

cartels' operations. Finally, there is minimal mobility. The Guatemalan military must acquire more helicopters and modern small arms. This will enable a more timely and effective response to interdiction operations. This must also be complimented with a joint and interagency Information Operations campaign to significantly disrupt cartels' decision making abilities and shape offensive operations. This can be achieved through the use of Military Deception Operations and Psychological Operations.

CONCLUSION

17. There is a credible threat of an escalation of violence resulting from competing drug cartels' fighting over territorial control. The absence of law enforcement in the rural countryside of Guatemala, particularly close to the Guatemala-Mexico border, has allowed cartels to move illicit drugs without impediment. This paper has highlighted the shortfalls in sense, command and act capabilities. It has examined ways to overcome these shortfalls through the purchase of equipment, greater interagency cooperation and a credible information operations campaign. If these capability shortfalls can be addressed then ability to counter the cartels will be greatly enhanced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

18. A close, cooperative effort is needed in order to gather further intelligence on the movements and routes used by cartels in order to move across the Guatemala-Mexico border. This will lead to identifying specific points along the porous border. Close communication among all actors is essential in maintaining functionality and strengthening the Guatemalan military's command and control structure in interagency efforts.

19. The acquisition of aerial surveillance technology is recommended. This can range from standard air traffic control radars monitored by a central air traffic command to the use of geospatial satellite imaging. While the acquisition of radar surveillance capabilities is more accessible than geospatial satellite imaging, the latter could be part of the cooperation initiative between Guatemala and regional allies such as the United States.
20. It is advisable that the Guatemalan Air Force recover its aerial surveillance capabilities through the refurbishing of aircraft. In addition, the purchase of standard reconnaissance aircraft would be beneficial. However, given the nature of the operation, the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) would greatly enhance the capabilities of law enforcement to track cartel movements with minimal risk of detection. Moreover, the costs associated with the maintenance of UAV surveillance capabilities is much less than conventional aircraft reconnaissance.
21. The Guatemalan military must critically analyse the sense, command and act functions to overcome capability shortfalls.
22. There needs to be significant thinking into the development of a joint and inter-agency information operations capability.

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