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MEXICO: IRREGULAR WARFARE AND HYBRID WARFARE AS THE CORNERSTONE FOR COUNTERING THE DRUG CARTELS

Maj J.J. Caballero Morales

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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The secrets of our weakness are secrets only to our own people.

- Douglas MacArthur.

INTRODUCTION

Mexico has been challenged by transnational organized crime, ranging from gangs through drug cartels and mafias. The cartels began operating as middlemen smugglers and during the last ten years have been rising as more powerful groups. The changes in the international system as well as the demand for narcotics around the world have planted the seeds of new incentives for these non-state actors. The challenge in dealing with these non-state actors is based in the fact that these groups have been using irregular warfare tactics including: assassinations, smuggling, car bombings, and even direct confrontation with state armed forces.

Due to the proximity with the most dominant economic and military power, Mexico has become one of the world's most expansive drug trafficking networks. Owing to this proximity, the Mexican Armed Forces have been facing an era of enormous complexity. The Mexican drug cartels have historically been very adaptable and during the last ten years have been performing efficient operations against the Mexican state.

This paper will outline the contributing factors to the outbreak of the drug related violence in Mexico which has been threatening internal security and argue that drug cartels are non-state actors that employ hybrid warfare and should be treated by the Mexican government and military as equivalent to insurgent forces using hybrid warfare. Labelling them as insurgent forces rather than criminal organizations will help orient improved government military actions against these organizations.

Properly identifying drug cartels as hybrid warfighting insurgents will help shape or redesign operations against this enemy.

LABELING THE THREAT

The Beginning and the Structural Causes

The origins of the drugs in Mexico and indeed the beginning of the drug cartels could be traced back to the end of the 19th century. During that period, Chinese immigration was a common destination to the United States because of the Taiping Rebellion in 1848.¹

Nevertheless, the massive flow of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. resulted in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited Chinese immigration. As a result, those immigrants, instead of entering the USA settled in Mexican territory mainly at the US-Mexico border.²

It was the time when opium was introduced to Mexico by Chinese people. From the beginning of the 20th century, opium and marijuana were grown in Mexico by the Chinese community; the latter had been introduced in Mexico by Spain in 1525.³ The result saw Mexico developing specialized skills in drug production. With a massive, profitable market to the North, these specialized skills transformed into today's drug trade.

There are several reasons and factors that led to the outbreak of the drug cartels in Mexico. In fact there is one important factor, but generally ignored, that contributed to the rise of the drug cartels: it is the North American Free Trade

¹ F. de Jonge, "Mexico and the Drug Cartels: A History of Fascination," *Peace Palace library (blog)*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.peacepalacelibrary.nl/2016/01/mexico-and-the-drug-cartels-a-history-of-fascination/>

² *Ibid.*

³ Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the origins of Mexico's War on Drugs*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 1

Agreement between Mexico, Canada and USA. When NAFTA went into effect on July 1, 1994, it created the world's largest trading block by eliminating many trade barriers among the three countries. The removal of many barriers also made access to each market easier for illicit flows of goods and illegal business.⁴

The Mexican cartels had old roots taking their starts as auxiliaries of Colombian criminal organizations facilitating their transshipping of cocaine and marijuana. But in the latter half of 1990s things changed. A month after the Colombian Cartels began to fracture with the death of Pablo Escobar, NAFTA was signed. Dermota who covered the Columbian Drug Cartel better than most states that "the Medellin Cartel awaited free trade with the enthusiasm of children on Christmas Eve".⁵ He also points out that hearing that NAFTA was coming, a trafficker told him that "soon, I'll be able to ship through Mexico right to the US."⁶ Soon after, the pupils of the Columbian drug cartels began to mature becoming more independent and sophisticated.⁷ Finally, Parenti states that Phil Jordan, a former DEA official, declared "For Mexico's drug gangs, NAFTA was a deal made in narco-heaven."⁸ Since the US is the world's largest consumer of South American narcotics, NAFTA resulted in increased regular and drug commerce.

Understanding the Threat

In 2006, when Felipe Calderon took office as president of Mexico, he focused the entire military on restoring order and openly declared the "war against the drugs."

⁴ Laura Carlsen. "Armoring NAFTA: The Battleground for Mexico's future. North America Congress of Latin America". Last accessed 15 March 2017. <http://nacla.org/news/armoring-nafta-battleground-mexico%E2%80%99s-future>

⁵ Ken Dermota. "Snow Business: Drugs and the Spirit of Capitalism". *World Policy Journal* 16, No. 4. (Winter 1999-2000): 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Anita Snow. "Mexican Drug Smugglers Get Sophisticated". *Contra Costa Times*. 17 September 1995.

⁸ Christian Parenti. *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*. (New York: Nation Books, 2011), 200-201.

At this juncture, Mexican society had been experiencing a high increase in violence and deterioration of internal security.⁹ Since the breakout of violence in Mexico there has been a large debate in trying to identify the threat that is afflicting Mexican society. Herein implies the importance to recognize and label the violence in order to understand its dynamics and the strategies that could bring it to an end.

Defining what kind of violence is facing the Mexican State is not easy to define since the terms ‘insurgency,’ ‘terrorism,’ and ‘war’ are not well recognized by Mexico. The latter is particularly misunderstood when the enemy is not coming from outside the country and the former because insurgency was a part of the start of modern Mexican society since before national inception. Mexican commentators and authors on the subject point out, “This is not a war where we are liberating a foreigner... Nor are we attempting to liberate another nation... [It] is a fight in which the security and the tranquility... are in play”.¹⁰

Mexican military doctrine goes further and points out that the Mexican state should not recognize the term insurgency. The Field Manual of Irregular Warfare notes that there is not a state of insurgency since Mexico is not over a colony in another country. Mexicans generally see insurgents as the heroes that shaped the country and achieved freedom from Spain.¹¹ So the national psyche definition does not necessarily match the world definition.

In 2006, when the Mexican government deployed the military against the drug cartels, President Calderon stated:

⁹ Ioan Grillo. *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 19.

¹⁰ Pedro Salazar Ugarte. *Critica de la Mano Dura: Como Enfrentar la Violencia* (Editorial Oceano: Mexico, 2012), 15.

¹¹ Secretariat of National Defense. *Manual Field of Irregular Warfare*, (SEDENA: Mexico, 2014), 5.

We have begun a frontal battle against the violence and organized crime... it will be a large battle and difficult, it will take time and economic resources, and unfortunately it also will take human lives.¹²

Rexton argues that organized groups use collective violence in order to achieve a particular goal and highlights the differences between low and high intensity conflict which is depicted in figure 1. He also says that the latter is impacting Mexico and points out that in the end it is a kind of war, just dealing with a different enemy.¹³ Finally, Rexton discusses that this is not an irregular war, nor a conventional war, nor a total or limited war, or any of the wars typically fought by conventional militaries.¹⁴ Having said that, the point is to understand what kind of conflict is confronting Mexico and what kind of enemy the state is dealing with.

	Low-Intensity Conflict	High-Intensity Conflict
Main Actors Challenging the State.	Irregular Forces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guerrillas, Insurgents, Paramilitaries, Militia, Terrorists. 	Violent Entrepreneurs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized Criminal, Syndicates, Cartels, Gangs, Vigilant groups.
Primary Motivation of Actors	Politics, Ideological, Religion, Ethnicity.	Illicit, Profit, Personal, Enrichment.
Primary Goal of Actors	Territorial Autonomy, Control of Government, Access to Resources, Repel Occupier.	Maintenance and/or Expansion of Power in Illicit Economy.
Environment of Organized Violence.	Political, Ideological, Social, Economic Spheres.	Hypercompetitive Illegal Markets.
Cessation of Violence	Victory, Reconciliation, Armistice, Peace.	Co-optation, Elimination, Management, Break-Even Point.

Figure 1 – Types of Conflict and its Actors

¹² Luis Astorga. “State, Illegal Drugs, Criminal Power and Six-year-term Challenges” Last accessed 17 May 2017, <http://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/estado-drogas-ilegales-y-poder-criminal-retos-transexenales>

¹³ Paul Rexton Kan. *Cartels at War: Mexico's Fuelled Violence and the Threat to U.S. National Security*. (Virginia: Potomac Books, 2012), 13-14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

Source: Paul Rexton Kan. *Cartels at War: Mexico's Fuelled Violence and the Threat to U.S. National Security*

Many academics and some U.S. politicians state that Mexico is facing a narco-insurgency. The first example is highlighted by Brands who states that the violence in Mexico might be described like a “multi-sided narco-insurgency; well financed cartels are doing the battle with the government.”¹⁵ He remarks that this insurgency has been significantly destabilizing the internal order in Mexico.¹⁶ The latter is illustrated by Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State who in September 2010, said:

We face an increasing threat from a well-organized network, drug trafficking threat that is in some cases, morphing into or making common cause with what we would consider an insurgency in Mexico and Central America... And these drug cartels are now showing more and more indices of insurgency.¹⁷

Another argument is emphasized by Bunker who points out that Mexico could be considered as criminal insurgency which is “the result of criminal enterprises competing with the state.”¹⁸ He further says that the competition is not for political control, but rather to be free from state control and maximize illegal economic circuits.¹⁹

Labeling the Beast

Rogan highlights that these organizations are seen as Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) rather than as criminal insurgencies. He states that are four reasons for not considering the TCO as an insurgency. First is political mobilization. None of the cartels have the political aim to overthrow the government and take

¹⁵ Hal Brands. “Mexico’s Narco-insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy. *The U.S. Army War College. Strategic Studies Institute*. (May 2009): 4-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Ioan Grillo. *El Narco: Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency*. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 213-214.

¹⁸ Robert J. Bunker. “Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What you Need to Know, not What you Want to Hear”. *Small Wars Journal. El Centro*. (13 September 2011): 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

control. Second, the nature and type of violence is different with 90% of the violence is being cartel on cartel members, which means that they are competing with each other. Third, is the concept of legitimacy. The use of violence and coercion by the cartels has resulted in losing popular support. Fourth is area control. Despite the fact that the cartels control zones of impunity within their areas of influence, the Mexican government has captured and killed kingpins from every major TCO and still maintains control over the state.²⁰

Rogan concludes that TCOs have weak support for being considered as insurgents “due to their lack of legitimacy because violence has been excessively cruel and lacking in purpose”.²¹

Roth and Sever scan the spectrum of terrorism and organized crime through the lens of the Kurdish Workers’ Party and say that there are some lessons that have to be learned. They state that organized crime groups have adopted many strategies. For instance, they: (1) are involved in illegal activities; (2) exploit excessive violence; (3) commit kidnappings, assassinations, and extortion; (4) act in secrecy; (5) challenge the state and the laws; (6) have back up leaders and foot soldiers; (7) are exceedingly adaptable and flexible; (8) threaten global security; and (9) enact deadly consequences for the former members that have quit the group.²²

On the other hand, many scholars suggest that Mexico is experiencing narco terrorism. Narthelius gives a definition of narco-terrorism, which includes drug production, widespread abuse of drugs, crime related to drugs, threats to the rule of

²⁰ Michael G. Rogan. *Is the Mexican Narco Violence an Insurgency*. (Kansas: Biblioscholar Dissertations, 2012), 15-18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²² Mitchel Roth and Murat Sever. “The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate”. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2007): 903.

law, endangerment of the public, and money laundry among others.²³ Makarenko discusses the interplay between TCO and terrorism and points out that terrorism and organized crime exist on the same plane and converge at a central point, as it is depicted in figure 2.²⁴ At the “black hole syndrome,” which is the convergence and the central point, criminal interests protected by terror tactics can be found.²⁵

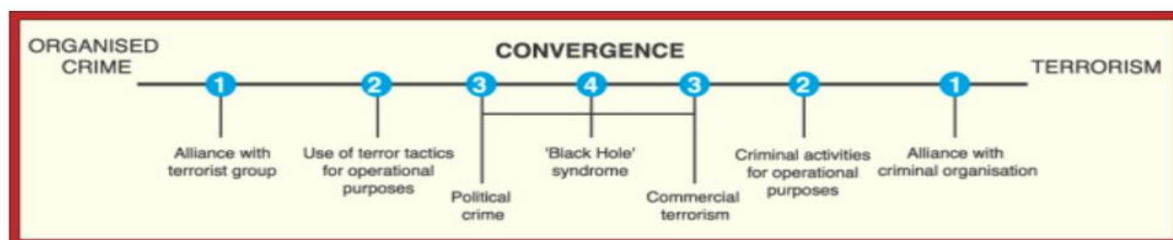


Figure 2 – The Span of Organized Crime to Terrorism

Source: Tamara Makarenko. “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism”. *Global Crime* Vol. 6. No.1. 130-131

Phillips and Berruecos state that categorizing the drug cartel conflict into alternative frames like insurgency, terrorism, or war, will just lead into further destabilization and will increase violence.²⁶

Due to the complexity of the threat and violence it has not been easy to label. Nevertheless, Sullivan and Bunker define it like a high intensity crime occurring due to a war conducted by violent cartels that fight each other in order to prevail or control a portion of the state which is seen as the “hypercompetitive illegal market”.²⁷

In an attempt to label and understand the threat, it is arguable that these organizations are closer to TCOs in name and by some functions but use methods of irregular warfare supported by terror tactics. Even the Mexican politicians do not

²³ Jonas Hartelius. “Narcoterrorism”. *Policy paper for the East West Institute and the Swedish Carnegie Institute*. (February 2008): iii.

²⁴ Tamara Makarenko. “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism”. *Global Crime Vol. 6. No.1* (February 2004): 130-131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

²⁶ George Phillips and Susana Berruecos. *Mexico’s Struggle for public Security: Organized Crime and State Responses*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 100

²⁷ John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker. “Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency”. (Bloomington: *Small Wars Journal*, 2012), 150.

recognize a threat like a narco-terrorism. Therefore, the term 'hybrid warfare' is appropriate. The Mexican armed forces should recognize that this kind of enemy is not easy to counter without properly defining the threat and then employing tactics to counter that threat. Defining it as hybrid warfare can help bring effective lessons learned from other countries or situations. The armed forces must be prepared to face the menace as a hybrid war which is using a great variety of unconventional means. Doing so will identify better tactics to fighting this war.

FACING AN ERA OF HYBRID WARFARE

The term 'hybrid' is not something new, in Cruceru's opinion the 'hybrid threat' is something about:

State actors and non-state actors try to develop new capacities and capabilities [brings unexpected tactics and operations and avoiding military confrontation ... a blend of military and non-military assets and operations, terrorism, guerrilla tactics, criminality and cyber-attacks that can affect the security interest...²⁸

Murray and Mansoor define it like a struggle which includes at the same time "a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars, which could [embrace] both state and non-state actors".²⁹ Hoffman describes what a hybrid threat poses, pointing out that criminality may be part of the threat "as it further destabilizes local governments, or abets the... irregular warriors by providing resources".³⁰ He goes further and states that the hybrid threat could involve smuggling, narco-terrorism, advanced munitions or weapons and even groups of non-state actors can select tactics

²⁸ Valerica Cruceru. "On Contemporary Warfare: Short Review of Specific Concepts". *Military Art and Science. Revista Academiei Fortelor Terestre no. 3.* (2014): 235

²⁹ William Murray and Peter Mansoor. "*Hybrid Warfare: fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*". (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

³⁰ Frank G. Hoffman. "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges". *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52, First Quarter (2009): 35.

and technologies and blend them in innovative ways to pose a new threat.³¹ The U.S. training circular TC7-100 also defines hybrid threat as:

The diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects... heralds a dangerous development in the capabilities of what was labeled a guerrilla or irregular force in past conflicts...³²

The U.S. Army Doctrine Publication defines the hybrid threat as a combination of different means such as, “the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal forces or a combination of these forces.”³³ It goes further and states that hybrid threat can employ protracted forms of warfare in populated areas such as urban zones and use people for taking advantage as human shields against attack.³⁴ The latter has been used by Mexican drug cartels as a current tactic for avoiding attack, detection or detention by the Mexican armed forces as well as the police forces.

Moreover, the Training Circular TC-100 provides a broad definition of threats and other actors in today’s complex global environment. Some of them are nation-state actors and non-state actors.³⁵ The circular also states that “defining the actors in hybrid threat requires a dynamic situational awareness of change in a particular operational environment.”³⁶ In defining the components of the hybrid threat, the TC-

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Training circular, TC 7-100: Hybrid Threat* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, November 26, 2010), v.

³³ Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Army Doctrine Publication 3.0: Unified Land Operations* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army, Government Printing Office, 2011), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Training circular, TC 7-100: Hybrid Threat* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, November 26, 2010), 2-1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-1.

100 discusses several key components that could be applied to the drug cartels including: criminal organizations, guerrilla units, and paramilitary forces.³⁷

Examples of drug cartels using these types of actions includes “Los Zetas” which has been identified as one of the most bloodthirsty gangs and its members were recruited from Special Forces. They have been developing structural organizations very close to guerrillas units and developing techniques and procedures to counter the military and police, due to the military and paramilitary training they have gotten. There have been identified a great number of guerilla training camps in Mexico and Guatemala finding booklets that shown their military training gained from Mexican SOF and Guatemalan 'kaibiles'.

The use of unconventional means that have been used by the drug cartels is well identified since they have profoundly affected the Mexican state. MacCraw states that “the cartels use military and terrorist tactics and weaponry... they employ... Improvised Explosive Devices”.³⁸

The proliferation of heavy weaponry, the ability to form squads, and the employment of military tactics enable the drug cartels to directly counter army patrols. Ellingwood and Wilkinson add, “This has all the makings of an infantry squad, or guerrilla fighting.”³⁹

The latter component is found in the militia or self-defence forces that emerged as a reaction to counter the violence pose by organized crime. The militias are not new in Mexico and they have been supported by the Mexican State since

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Committee on Homeland Security House of Representatives, *On the Border and in the Line of Fire: US Law Enforcement, Homeland Security, and Drug Cartel Violence*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012), 40-42

³⁹ Ken Ellingwood and Tracy Wilkinson, “Drug Cartels’ New weaponry means War,” *Los Angeles Times*, Last Accessed 27 May 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-mexico-arms-race15-2009mar15-story.html>

1990s against the Zapatista Army of National Liberation as an effort to counter the insurgency. Even though initially the militias seemed to relieve violence, as soon as they got organized they became predatory and abusive. Felbab-Brown states that “the militias become a profound threat to order and rule of law and a new driver of conflict”.⁴⁰ It is well known that some militias have evolved into criminal organizations which contribute to the concept of hybrid warfare. For example, the criminal group 'The Knights Templar' emerged from self-defence force and soon after became one of the most dangerous drug cartels.

The military forces must redesign training and operations in order to reorganize into a capable force to fight the hybrid warfare threat efficiently. A hybrid war is defined in the Joint Operating Concept as one seen as more challenging to counter than traditional warfare and different to fight compared to policing actions against criminal organizations.

Key success factors noted in the Joint Operating Concept (JOC) include: considering the structure of the enemy which by deduction also considers characteristics linked to business, criminal, and warfighting organizations; changing or adapting technology to combat these organizations; and using a systems approach—a factor not discussed in the JOC but should be.⁴¹

Looking at the use of technology refers to advantages in technology, making clear that the use of it by irregular threats will surrender them more capable, lethal, and even difficult to counter.⁴² Having security forces use it against this now named enemy will also be a boost to the war effort. For example, the use of military

⁴⁰ Vanda Felbab-Brown. “The Rise of Militias in Mexico: Citizens’ Security or Further Conflict Escalation?”. Features *PRISM Volume 5, No. 4*. (December 2015): 174.

⁴¹ United States. Department of Defense. *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats. Joint Operational Concept (JOC)v 2.0*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. DoD. 17 May 2010), 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

surveillance systems may augment that of counter narcotics. Therefore, the use of technology on both sides will be a key enabler.

In terms of structure, criminal networks no longer depend on one single leader. These are adaptable systems but still maintain a structure in some form. Salcedo and Garay state that the Mexican cartels have changed structures, “they have become transnational crime networks which are enormous, decentralized and difficult to map and control”.⁴³ They also provide a broad definition of criminal networks which are “decentralized like a virus... but remains dormant in human cells, some criminal structures mutate, restructure, adapted to changed conditions.”⁴⁴ These systems are a form of hybrid warfighting systems.

The threat that has been posed by drug cartels is more about hybrid warfare. As such, the armed forces need to be reorganized for countering the threat in an efficient manner. In 2006, when the government decided to employ the military forces to counter the threat, there was not an operation design neither an analysis for a better understanding of the threat. The lessons learned have been hard for the military; it seemed that they were waging a war of attrition.

A new approach will need to include SOF, conventional military trained in hybrid warfare, and police. In the end, the police force will work at the local level since they know the will of local population as well as the methods of enemy concealment kingpins while SOF and conventional forces can bring hybrid warfighting techniques.

CONCLUSION

⁴³ Eduardo Salcedo-Albaran and Luis Jorge Garay. “Networks of Evil: How Transnational Criminal Networks Can Be Disrupted”. *Vortex: City Journal*. Last accessed 21 May 2017. <http://www.scivortex.org/single-post/2016/06/24/Eduardo-SalcedoAlbar%C3%A1n-and-Luis-Jorge-Garay-on-how-transnational-criminal-networks-can-be-disrupted>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

This paper highlighted the key components of hybrid threat and argued that the war on drugs is a form of hybrid warfare. Balancing similarities and differences between hybrid warfare and criminal actions, the balance appears to lean to warfare. For that reason, it is best to label narco-terrorism or the criminal related actions in Mexico as hybrid warfare.

This conclusion is fortified by analysing the spectrum of conflict from criminal organizations through terrorists to insurgents to regular warfare and seeing where along that scale these actions best fit in a national security context.

Calling it hybrid warfare will help Mexican officials better train and employ Mexico's national defense system against this threat which will provide added power in this war. Once hybrid warfare is labelled and acknowledged, the Mexican armed forces can design training and operational systems that will enable more effective combat against these forces in conjunction with national policing. The combination of proper training, operational design for hybrid warfare, and action will help reduce the violence seen in Mexico as a result of drugs.

As such, the armed forces need to redesign an operational approach for hybrid warfare internal to the nation. It has been argued that many scholars are trying to label the threat as an insurgency, terrorism, or war. But one thing is certain: That the Mexican armed forces are facing a real threat and require training to adapt.

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