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# Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 3: U.S. Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime: DOA (Dead On Arrival)?

Robert J. Bunker  
*Claremont Graduate University*

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# Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 3

## U.S. Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime: DOA (Dead On Arrival)?

By [Robert Bunker](#)

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The Document: On 25 July 2011, the National Security Staff released [Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime: Addressing Converging Threats to National Security](#). The report is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc/transnational-crime> and can be accessed as a pdf or in html by using the links provided (1). The contents are as follows:

i. Definition

ii. Letter from President Barack Obama: Executive Summary;

I. Introduction,

II. Transnational Organized Crime: A Growing Threat to National and International Security,

III. Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime: Priority Actions;

1. Start at Home: Taking Shared Responsibility for Transnational Organized Crime,

2. Enhance Intelligence and Information Sharing,

3. Protect the Financial System and Strategic Markets against Transnational Organized Crime,

4. Strengthen Interdiction, Investigations, and Prosecutions,

5. Disrupt Drug Trafficking and Its Facilitation of Other Transnational Threats,

6. Build International Capacity, Cooperation, and Partnerships.

Key Statements:

a). The characteristics of transnational organized crime (TOC) may include that— “They attempt to gain influence in government, politics, and commerce through corrupt as well as legitimate means;”

b). “Criminal networks are not only expanding their operations, but they are also diversifying their activities, resulting in a convergence of transnational threats that has evolved to become more complex, volatile, and destabilizing. These networks also threaten U.S. interests by forging alliances with corrupt elements of national governments and using the power and influence of those elements to further their criminal activities.”

c). “In January 2010, the United States Government completed a comprehensive review of international organized crime—the first on this topic since 1995. Based on the review and subsequent reporting, the

Administration has concluded that, in the intervening years, international—or transnational— organized crime has expanded dramatically in size, scope, and influence and that it poses a significant threat to national and international security.”

Western Hemisphere Overview: “TOC networks—including transnational gangs—have expanded and matured, threatening the security of citizens and the stability of governments throughout the region, with direct security implications for the United States. Central America is a key area of converging threats where illicit trafficking in drugs, people, and weapons—as well as other revenue streams—fuel increased instability. Transnational crime and its accompanying violence are threatening the prosperity of some Central American states and can cost up to eight percent of their gross domestic product, according to the World Bank. The Government of Mexico is waging an historic campaign against transnational criminal organizations, many of which are expanding beyond drug trafficking into human smuggling and trafficking, weapons smuggling, bulk cash smuggling, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. TOC in Mexico makes the U.S. border more vulnerable because it creates and maintains illicit corridors for border crossings that can be employed by other secondary criminal or terrorist actors or organizations. Farther south, Colombia has achieved remarkable success in reducing cocaine production and countering illegal armed groups, such as the FARC, that engage in TOC. Yet, with the decline of these organizations, new groups are emerging such as criminal bands known in Spanish as *Bandas Criminales*, or *Bacrim*s”

Analysis: This strategy was released less than three months ago and according to Bob Killebrew “...is in effect a replacement for the now-outdated U.S. strategy to combat terrorism. This is a good first step” (2). While I agree it is a step in the right direction, the threat perceptions underlying it are overly traditionalist—some would even say woefully obsolete—and representative of state-centric thinking. I thus have very great concerns regarding the threat assumptions underlying the strategy since, if the baseline assumptions are faulty, then the rest of the strategy that is derived from those assumptions becomes highly suspect (3). Unfortunately, 21st century ‘street realities’ of the last eleven years taking place in Mexico, in areas of Central America, and in other locales appear in no way to have influenced the threat perceptions underlying the strategy. At best, transnational organized crime is viewed as gaining ‘influence in governmental politics’, ‘forging alliances with corrupt elements of national governments’, and ‘threatening the security of citizens and the stability of governments throughout the region’ (within the context of some Central American states). Such perceptions are indicative of the primacy and immutability of the nation-state as a social and political form of human organization. TOC within this threat context is viewed much like bloated ticks feeding off of host states. They represent parasitical organizations drawing upon illicit, and at times licit, economies to sustain themselves. TOC, such as the Mexican cartels, could thus never criminalize, capture, or kill a host state—or a region or city within it—based on these threat perceptions. The emergence of a ‘criminal-state’ or a ‘new warmaking entity’ or the existence of a ‘criminal insurgency’ taking place within a state simply cannot be accounted for in a strategy derived from these threat perceptions. The governments and citizens of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras should no doubt be comforted by the fact that they are only threatened with issues of stability and no more. While the strategy may serve to perpetuate the legalistic charade of the nation-state’s ‘monopoly on political violence’ and ‘control over its sovereign borders,’ it does a great disservice to the American people and others by not fully recognizing the TOC threat. Criminal-insurgencies are currently raging across Mexico, in areas of Central America, and in other locales (4). Cities and regions have been captured by factopoliticized cartel and gang entities with criminal para-states established by the Zetas, the Sinaloans, and other criminal organizations. This is representative of the blurring of crime and war ‘nightmare scenarios’ which have been debated since the 1990s and have since manifested themselves throughout the globe. Until US governmental threat perceptions mature—especially in strategic documents that outline our national policies—the cartel and gang threats we are now witnessing

in the Western Hemisphere will continue to be misunderstood and underestimated.

## Notes

All quotes without notes pertain to the White House strategy document.

1. Also see “Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the Announcement of the Transnational Organized Crime Strategy” Justice News Monday, 25 July 2011, <http://www.justice.gov/iso/opa/ag/speeches/2011/ag-speech-110725.html>
2. Col Robert B. Killebrew, U.S. Army (Retired), “Crime & War” Proceedings October 2011: 26. This citation contains a note thanking Killebrew’s CNAS colleague Matt Irvine for his initial perception concerning it replacing the U.S. counterterrorism strategy.
3. My concerns are very different than those articulated by the TransBorder Project, a project of the Center for International Policy in Washington, DC. See Tom Barry, “U.S. Drug War Turns to Transnational Combat” Border Lines Wednesday, 3 August 2011, <http://borderlinesblog.blogspot.com/2011/08/us-drug-war-turns-to-transnational.html>
4. The developed construct is attributed to John P. Sullivan in 2008. Many of his writings on this subject first appeared in Small Wars Journal

## About the Author

### Robert Bunker

Dr. Robert J. Bunker holds degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, social science, anthropology-geography, and history. Training taken includes that provided by DHS, FLETC, DIA, Cal DOJ, Cal POST, LA JRIC, NTOA, and private security entities in counter-terrorism, counter-surveillance, incident-response, force protection, and intelligence. Dr. Bunker has been involved in red teaming and counter-terrorism exercises and has provided operations support within Los Angeles County.

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## Links:

- {1} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/robert-bunker>
- {2} <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc/transnational-crime>
- {3} <http://www.justice.gov/iso/opa/ag/speeches/2011/ag-speech-110725.html>
- {4} <http://borderlinesblog.blogspot.com/2011/08/us-drug-war-turns-to-transnational.html>
- {5} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/comment/reply/11580#comment-form>

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