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The U.S. Strategic Imperative Must Shift From Iraq/Afghanistan to Mexico/The Americas and the Stabilization of Europe

Robert J. Bunker

A Plea to the Barack Obama Administration and Both Houses of Congress.

The United States currently faces two strategic level non-state (network) threats—but only one of them is openly recognized. Al Qaeda, and other elements of radical Islam, have been recognized as the #1 threat since the 11 September 2001 attacks which killed nearly 3,000 Americans and caused well over 100 billion dollars in infrastructure damage, emergency response, and economic disruption. This threat which garners ongoing media attention, however, on many fronts pales in comparison to that represented by the drug cartels and narco-gangs which for decades now have been evolving, mutating, and growing in capabilities and power in the Americas. While presently viewed as a ‘crime and law enforcement issue’, as Al Qaeda was pre 9-11, this more subtle and encompassing strategic threat has resulted in the deaths of well over 100,000 citizens of the Americas (roughly 30,000 in Mexico alone in the last 4 years) and has caused the destabilization of a number of nations including Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, and witnessed the rise of heightened narco influence within regions of the US homeland along its Southern Border. Economically, the sustained damage and disruption caused by drug cartel and narco-gang activities to private individuals, local economies, and governmental bodies is well past the trillion dollar mark and rising. Both of these non-state (network) threats challenge the institutions of the many nations affected, the loyalty of the indigenous populations to the state itself, and are indicative of the ‘war over social and political organization’ now being waged in various regions of the globe.

The 9-11 attacks resulted in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by US and coalition forces. In hindsight, it can be agreed that the invasion of Afghanistan was a strategic necessity while the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with the 9-11 attacks and can be chalked up to the foreign policy failings of a prior administration. What can also not be disputed is that the intent of these operations has politically shifted over time into the abyss of nation- and democracy-building exercises supported by mercenary forces and marred by domestic tribal power politics and the rampant corruption of autocratic rulers. The imposition of ‘democracy by the sword’ on tribal cultures and attempts at wholesale societal-engineering is imprudent even in best case scenarios. The cold reality that we face in these conflicts is that the US is hemorrhaging money, wearing out its forces, and enriching the pockets of corrupt tribal leaders and mercenary corporations. We, as a nation, cannot sustain these campaigns without wrecking ourselves as a great power in

the process. The revenues simply do not exist, our national debt and the interest servicing it is mounting, and the opportunity costs of ignoring the Americas and our European allies are too high. It is time to accept that our best course of action is to simply render Afghanistan (along with Western Pakistan) and Iraq safe enough so as not to threaten the American and European homelands, accepting that this may result in competing tribal zones of interest in the former. Following this guideline, the US should phase withdraw its resources, both economic and military, from Afghanistan and Iraq at the earliest opportunities as it refocuses its strategic attentions.

The drug cartels and narco-gangs of the Americas, with those in Mexico of highest priority, must now be elevated to the #1 strategic threat to the United States. While the threat posed by Al Qaeda, and radical Islam is still significant, it must be downgraded presently to that of secondary strategic importance. Europe, due to the threat derived from changing demographics, larger numbers of citizens radicalized, and proximity to Islamic states, many of which contain Islamist insurgent forces, will continue to identify the threat of radical Islam as their #1 strategic imperative and should be allowed to take the opportunity to share, if not take the strategic lead, in this important area of concern. The recently heightened tensions in Europe with the threat of Mumbai style attacks directed at a number of its capital cities are indicative of the mandate which should now be provided to allied states such as Great Britain, France, and Germany and that of the more encompassing European Union. The US must help defend the line in Europe against terrorist attack, the imposition of Sharia law, and other threats to the social organization of our allies such as the disenfranchisement of women, while acknowledging for the immediate future, we have ignored for too long a new type of threat which has arisen far closer to home.

The US has unknowingly found itself in a multi-front war with two strategic level non-traditional threats that are not states. While Islamic prison radicalization is taking place domestically, some African American gang members have joined the Jihadist cause, numerous Al Qaeda affinity active shooter incidents have taken place, and Somali immigrants recruited in the US and operating back in their own nation as suicide bombers have been evident, the levels of radicalization and the recruitment pool potentials vis-à-vis those in Europe are presently still quite low. On the other hand, shifting demographics inside the United States, via both legal and illegal immigration from Mexico, has resulted in a relatively youthful Mexican-American (citizen) and illegal Mexican (non-citizen) population now in the 25-30 million range and rising. Virtually all the border zones of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, including the major cities within them, have majority populations of Mexican ancestry. As these demographics increase within American society, and projections suggest they will, the fates of Mexico and the US become increasingly intertwined. While terrorism and violence is always of concern, including that utilized by Al Qaeda and affiliates in attacks against the West, a far more dangerous issue is that of threats to US institutional stability. It must be recognized that at present the dominant threat to the US homeland is the potential for corruption of its institutions by the Mexican cartels and narco gangs followed, in tandem, by cross-border violence spillover. The use of the *¿Plato O Plomo?* (Silver or Lead) insurgency technique of creating shadow cartel operating structures that hollow out local governmental authority within a region has proven exceptionally effective in many states of Mexico— including a focus on the plazas along the US border. While the US is well prepared to stand up to acts of violence directed against it, the utilization of Mexican cartel ‘violence-corruption’ techniques brings in a new element that

makes it a larger and presently more insidious threat than that posed by Al Qaeda and its radical Islamic associates.

To date, the levels of corruption of US public agents appear not to have significantly increased and although the active investigation of corruption is increasing so too are the number of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers now deployed. Regions of Arizona and Texas have armed cartel operatives positioned throughout the countryside with local police chiefs recently publicly stating that violence has officially crossed into the United States. Further violence and corruption potentials must be considered in the context of Mexican drug cartel and narco gang penetration into the US. As early as 2008, over 195 US cities had Mexican narco gang distribution and enforcement units situated within them. This is in addition to the expanses of marijuana fields controlled and defended by the cartels in Western US states and the domestic Mexican street and prison gang drug contractor network which numbers somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 Sureños (Sur-13), Tango Blast, Azteca, and related gang members.

In addition to threats to the American homeland, the domestic security posture and vitality of the Mexican state, and those of other Latin American nations also affected by narco corruption and violence, is of increasing concern. Parts of Mexico have been lost and may or may not now be regained. The same can be said for regions in Central America as well as for Colombia, whose decades long wars with insurgents, cartels, and gangs is still far from over. Ultimately, the United States must create an ‘organizing hemispheric strategy’ to contain the drug cartel and narco-gang threat. This was one of the policy recommendations discussed in the *Narcos Over the Border* (Routledge) manuscript finished in 2009 and echoed in the recently released *Crime Wars: Gangs, Cartels, and U.S. National Security* (Center for a New American Security). Such a comprehensive Hemisphere Defense Plan for the Americas would take into consideration the new forms of war and conflict now taking place in the early 21st century. In one sense, it would represent an update and modification of the early 19th century Monroe Doctrine and extend its prerogative to encompass non-state, network, and indigenous threats to the Americas. The United States of America must take the lead, focus necessary national elements of power, and help to coordinate the activities of allied American states to contain and combat what are basically ‘new war-making entities’ evolving in the New World. Such a strategy must also include community building at home and the provision of the necessary economic resources to create sustainable and accountable gang programs—something the city of Los Angeles and many other major urban zones in the US have failed to do time and again with ultimately haphazard and politicized initiatives.

Time is of the essence in this matter. No defining 9/11 incident is expected to take place in the near term concerning the drug cartel and narco-gang threat to the Americas which would galvanize the American public and its government. In fact, we can expect further Al Qaeda and affinity terrorist attacks to take place in Europe and the United States that will grab media headlines and further obscure, downgrade, and relegate the far greater cartel and gang threat to the media shadows. In retrospect, Mexico would have had a far better chance against the cartel and gang threat if it had acted years prior to going on the offensive in 2006 —though it still vehemently denies the truth and is unable to publicly state, because of national pride and hubris, that it is facing criminal insurgencies within its borders.¹ To call what is taking place in Mexico

the actions of organized crime is delusional and as relevant to contemporary thinking as viewing the present-day world through the prism of the Cold War. The Mexican government made a strategic mistake and is paying for it on a daily basis with a domestic war that is far from over. The intensity of the conflict is increasingly more difficult to gauge with the ability to engage in free speech (reporting) across much of Mexico now disappearing, given the ongoing suppression and cooption of its news media. If the US government significantly delays in doing the right thing and does not shift its strategic imperative to addressing the rampant problems of Mexico and the Americas, including in the border regions of our own homeland and in enclaves within our major metropolitan zones, along with ongoing stabilization of Europe against the radical Islamic threat, we too as a nation will pay for it dearly in the years to come.

Notes

1. The initial usage of the term ‘criminal insurgencies’ is attributed to John P. Sullivan, a friend, scholar in his own right, and frequent co-writer of essays on gang and cartel issues. The term has proven to be an excellent fit to describe ‘blurred crime and war’ / ‘gray area’ conflict between states and non-state organizations within the more encompassing Epochal Warfare paradigm.

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