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Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 11

Mexico's Vietnam War? Soldier-to-Criminal Exchange Rates and Narco Battlefield Deaths in Context

By [Robert Bunker](#)

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Of extreme consternation in this strategic note is that not only has SEDENA recently highlighted its 18 to 1 soldier-to-criminal exchange rates and proclaimed that it is basically unbeatable on the battlefield (akin to what the US did in Vietnam) but that, in the context of the current war in Mexico, the Mexican army is presently irrelevant to the actual fighting (killing) taking place since a total of 19 of 20 (93-95% of) gang and cartel foot soldier deaths can be accounted for by engagements with opposing gang and cartel commando units and/or personnel.

Via: "Hannah Stone, "18 'Criminals' Die for Each Soldier: Mexico's Sight Crime Tuesday, 20 December 2011:

Mexico's Defense Department said that for every soldier who died in clashes with organized criminal groups in the last five years, 18 alleged criminals were killed.

The Defense Department (Sedena) released figures showing that 2,268 "aggressors" had been killed in confrontations with the armed forces since President Felipe Calderon came to power in 2006, reports Proceso.

The authorities define "confrontations" as clashes between the authorities and suspected criminals, or between criminals, while "aggressions" are when the armed forces are attacked, but do not respond.

There have been 1,948 of these "confrontations and aggressions," involving the army in the last five years, according to Sedena, killing 126 soldiers.

InSight Crime has reported on the dramatic rise in deaths in the confrontations and aggressions over the past few years, which has raised concerns that this could be due to a rise in extrajudicial killings by the army. As one former Mexican intelligence official told InSight Crime, many in the security forces are frustrated by the skyrocketing death toll and inept Mexican justice system, leading some to take the expedient option.

In total, including those confrontations which did not involve the army— either between criminal groups, or criminals and other branches of the security forces— there were 2,099 deaths in clashes last year, according to the government [1].

Analysis:

The recent release of Mexico's Defense Department (SEDENA) information on soldier-civilian exchange rates on the surface is welcome news. For every 18 gang and cartel foot soldiers killed, 1 army soldier is killed in the process. Hence, 2,268 narcos have been killed to 126 soldiers. Deeper analysis of this information, however, results in quite a few unanswered questions and raises some significant issues of concern, especially when the information is weighed within the broader context of the overall narco related killings in Mexico over the last 4 to 5 years.

These unanswered questions and issues of concern are as follows:

- 1,948 incidents of what are termed “confrontations and aggressions” have taken place between the Mexican army and the gang and cartel foot soldiers over the last five years. Confrontations are incidents in which the Mexican army, or other gang and/or cartel forces, engage opposing gang and cartel foot soldiers. Aggressions are when the Mexican army is attacked—like in a hand grenade or drive-by attack—but does not respond with counter-weapons fires. If the number of narcos killed (2,268) is divided by the number of these incidents (1,948), then a kill factor of 1.16 is achieved per engagement. This suggests that such incidents are, on average, very minor patrol and check point type encounters, although a number of large scale incidents could be balanced out by many 0 kill factor incidents. Without access to the underlying SEDENA dataset, only speculative insights may be made.
- Within the context of the greater dataset of battlefield deaths taking place in Mexico, the overall significance of 2,268 gang and cartel foot soldier deaths also comes into question. See the following statistics concerning organized criminal killings via

Viridiana Ríos and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2010*, San Diego, CA: Trans-Border Institute, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, February 2011: 18:

Mexican army involvement in 2,268 potential narco deaths represents less than 6.5% of the overall deaths— probably at about the 5% range but this may be generous. Remember that the 2,268 deaths includes gang and/or cartel on gang and/or cartel confrontations over a 5 year period while the aggregate organized crime killings (via Rios and Shirk) only covers a 4 year period.

Thus, the 18 to 1 soldier-to-criminal exchange rate only accounts for 1 of 20 (5% of) gang and cartel foot soldier deaths. A total of 19 of 20 (93-95% of) gang and cartel foot soldier deaths can be accounted for by engagements with opposing gang and cartel commando units and/or personnel. Some consideration to Mexican law enforcement killings of gang and cartel foot soldiers has been factored into these estimates [2].

If these figures are correct, it would suggest that Mexican army operations against the criminal insurgencies taking place in Mexico may, at least by the narco deaths criteria, be considered ineffectual. Also, from the perspective of peace enforcement and/or keeping operations, the Mexican army has failed because ongoing gang and/or cartel on gang and/or cartel engagements are taking place in Mexico and 95% of the time, when actual killings result, the Mexican army is nowhere to be seen. This would suggest that, after 5 years of Mexican army operations, this institution of the Mexican state can now be viewed as potentially irrelevant to the outcome of the power struggles between the competing gang and cartel groups.

If this were not enough, the Trans-Border Institute (TBI) table shows that 55% of the narco deaths are in some way linked to Sinaloa cartel activities. While Los Zetas— which have about 9% of the killings associated with them— appear to dominate news reports, it is the Sinaloa cartel which appears to be the major belligerent in the ground wars in Mexico.

• Not only is Mexican army effectiveness coming into question here but, in one sense, its deployment be considered as providing the cartels with additional recruits. This perception can be better understood by viewing desertion data for Mexico.

Via David A. Kuhn and Robert J. Bunker, “Just where do Mexican cartel weapons come from?”
Small Wars & Insurgencies 22:5 December 2011, 819-820:

- In the eight years since the Zetas were organized, more than 120,000 Mexican soldiers have deserted, according to the government’s records. Yet the country’s military officials have made little effort to track their whereabouts, security experts said, creating a potential pool of military trained killers for the drug-trafficking gangs wreaking havoc in the country [June 2007].
- Of the 4,890 soldiers assigned to the federal police force to help combat traffickers during the 2000-06 administration of President Vicente Fox, all but 10 deserted, said Gomez, citing Defense Secretariat figures [June 2007].
- General Ángeles Dahujare announced that more than 17,000 soldiers had deserted in 2008 [March 2009].
- Some 1,680 Mexican army special forces soldiers have deserted in the past decade, the Milenio newspaper reported, citing Defense Secretariat figures [March 2011].
- Some 50,000 soldiers have been providing security and fighting drug traffickers across Mexico since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderon militarized the conflict with the country’s cartels ... The deserters include snipers, paratroopers, survival experts, intelligence analysts and

rapid reaction specialists, the newspaper said [March 2011].

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On balance, far more military personnel have defected to the cartels over the years than have been killed by the Mexican army. This would result in some tens-of-thousands of ex-soldiers going over to the cartels vis-à-vis the 2,268 potential narco deaths the SEDENA data highlights. 2,180 gang and cartel members have, however, been arrested by the Mexican army over the last 5 years [3]. This unfortunately, does not significantly mitigate the effects of the military deserters going over to the cartels. Further, conviction rates in Mexico in the past were at about 2% and, additionally, man-for-man a cartel would gladly see the loss of an unskilled teenage lookout in exchange for a military trained young adult joining their organization.

- Within the context of this conflict, the Vietnam war analogy Mexico's Vietnam War² was brought into the title of this strategic note for a couple of reasons. The first is for US readers to better understand the magnitude of the casualties that have taken place in Mexico in recent years. The Vietnam war took place for the US from 1959 through 1973 (about 15 years) and witnessed 58,000 US deaths. These deaths took place in Vietnam and were primarily of military personnel (combatants). The war in Mexico (i.e. the aggregate of the various criminal insurgencies taking place) has been officially going on since December 2006 (5 years now), though Ion Grillo, author of *Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* would suggest it began as early as the Fall of 2004 with the initial push of the Sinaloa cartel into a Gulf cartel held plaza [4].

Based on the December 2006 starting date, the total number of deaths is presently estimated at about 50,000 with the last official release of information in January 2011 citing 34,612 deaths. The 50,000 deaths took place in Mexico (not "over there" like in Vietnam) and includes non-combatants (including Mexican women and children). Further, these deaths took place in about a third of the time period of the US fatalities in Vietnam and in a country with about two-thirds the population size during the time period in which the fatalities took place. While US citizens ate their dinners watching Vietnam war coverage, many of the citizens in Mexico experience this type of carnage on a routine basis by seeing the bodies hanging on the bridges and on the streets or having to hunker down on the floor while firefights take place outside their homes.

The 50,000 deaths in Mexico are thus far more significant, for the reasons explained, than the 58,000 US deaths in Vietnam [5]. We know what the Vietnam war did to the US via the anti-war protests and the turning of many of the institutions of America upon itself. In many ways, the Mexican citizenry has been far more restrained with regard to protests than a US citizenry that experienced its war under far less threatening circumstances although, in the present Mexican scenario, the simple solution of disengaging from the war by bringing the troops home from overseas does not exist. The war is taking place domestically which tends to place the Mexican government and its citizens in the position of the South Vietnamese rather than in the position of the Americans.

The second reason the Vietnam analogy has been drawn upon is to highlight the type of conflict taking place and its relationship to battlefield deaths. In this instance, however, Vietnam and Mexico may have fewer similarities and more differences. Vietnam was a Maoist inspired insurgency rooted in North

Vietnamese nationalism and communist ideology. It represented a political insurgency plan and simple and incorporated elements of terrorism and later conventional ground operations into the conflict. The US, by all accounts, won on the battlefield with its soldier to Vietcong and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) exchange rates. Even the Tet Offensive in January 1968 was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese though, as we know, that conflict (and that offensive) had nothing to do with physical victory on the battlefield or exchange rates. Col. Harry Summers encounter with a NVA Colonel after the war made this succinctly clear:

In July 1974 he returned to Vietnam as chief of the Negotiations Division of the Four Party Joint Military Team (FPJMT). The main task of the U.S. delegation was to resolve the status of those Americans still listed as missing. During one of his liaison trips to Hanoi, Harry had his now-famous exchange with his North Vietnamese counterpart. When Harry told him, "You know, you never beat us on the battlefield," Colonel Tu responded, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant." [6].

Mexico, many of us at SWA Centrowould argue, is facing multiple criminal insurgencies. We are also seeing glimpses of spiritual insurgencies breaking out, derived from narcocultura and narcosaint worship. While the more dominant criminal insurgencies may not have begun with a political component, they have since defacto broadened to include increasingly politicized gangs and cartels. These threat groups, once in a possession of a town, city or region, gain political power as a compliment to their economic and military (criminal gunmen) prowess.

Of extreme consternation in this strategic note is that not only has SEDENA recently highlighted its 18 to 1 soldier-to-criminal exchange rates and proclaimed that it is basically unbeatable on the battlefield [7] (akin to what the US did in Vietnam) but that, in the context of the current war in Mexico, the Mexican army is presently irrelevant to the actual fighting (killing) taking place since a total of 19 of 20 (93-95% of) gang and cartel foot soldier deaths can be accounted for by engagements with opposing gang and cartel commando units and/or personnel.

As we know, the US military was actively engaged in the Vietnam war as a full battlefield participant and did not understand the type of war that was being fought. Hopefully, the Mexican army engaging in its own counter-insurgency operations, has (or will) learn something from the US failure in Vietnam. Soldier-to-criminal exchange rates (i.e. body counts) are not what this conflict is about and the release of information pertaining to those rates looks especially bad when it is provided by a military force which is not a real battlefield participant (as defined by the percentage of criminal combatant deaths) [8].

End Note(s):

1. See <http://insightcrime.org/component/k2/item/1999-18-criminals-die-for-each-soldier-mexico>
Original Spanish article at "Presume Sedena superioridad; muere un soldado por cada 18 criminales."
Proceso 19 de diciembre de 2011 <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=291994>

2. Gang and cartel foot soldier deaths at the hands of Mexican law enforcement have been factored into these estimates. Community level law enforcement in much of Mexico is outclassed by cartel commandos/personnel and a significant percentage of it is corrupted (which would once again result in gang and cartel killings attributed to opposing gang and cartel forces). The working assumption is that within the 5% of killings attributed to the Mexican military, Mexican law enforcement (primarily Federal) would account for 1-2% of the killings. Even if we assume total Mexican military and federal police

killings (of gang and cartel foot soldiers) were 7% of the total the 19 of 20 (adjusted 93% of/ rounded) gang and cartel foot soldier deaths attributed to opposing gang and cartel would still be a viable estimate.

3. The original Spanish source is as follows “Además de los caídos, se ha detenido a dos mil 180 delincuentes lo que, según la Sedena, significa que se ha dejado fuera de circulación a cuatro mil 448 probables responsables de un delito, entre muertos y capturados.” See “Presume Sedena superioridad; muere un soldado por cada 18 criminales” *Proceso* 19 de diciembre de 2011, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=291994>

4. Ion Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011: 10.

5. Criticisms may be made that the “innocent” US soldier draftees sent to Vietnam did not deserve to die and therefore those deaths were more significant to their home population vis-à-vis the Mexican gang and cartel members whom represent the majority of those killed in Mexico. A counterargument may be made that the criminals killed in Mexico typically belong to large families and that those deaths are taking place locally which not only traumatizes those families but other members of the Mexican citizenry which are being subjected to the gang and cartel violence taking place around them.

6. David T. Zabecki, “Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., was a soldier, scholar, military analyst, writer, editor and friend.” *The Clausewitz Homepage*.d., <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/SummersObitText.htm>

7. The original Spanish statement attributed to General Ricardo Trevilla is “El vocero de la Sedena, general Ricardo Trevilla, presumió la “superioridad” del Ejército en la lucha contra el crimen organizado. Afirmó que las estadísticas reflejan que el adiestramiento y no las armas, es lo que importa. En ese rubro no existe punto de comparación entre militares y delincuentes, dijo.” See “Presume Sedena superioridad; muere un soldado por cada 18 criminales” *Proceso* 19 de diciembre de 2011, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=291994>

8. Of additional interest is the insight Crime and Human Rights Watch (HRW) concerns over the perceived rise in extrajudicial killings by the Mexican army. While such killings under the auspices of international law are indeed designated as ‘war crimes’ the Mexican army, at best, would account for 5% (or less) of the extrajudicial total if a linear projection of their involvement in criminal combatant fatalities is taken. Analysts, and humanitarian focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) especially, should consider that the probable 95% (or more) of the extrajudicial killings taking place in Mexico at the hands of the gangs and cartel are not in anyway associated with the Mexican army. This perception is not being offered as a justification for extrajudicial killings conducted by the Mexican army, but rather to convey to HRW and others that they are focusing on what appears to be the lesser offender.

About the Author

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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://insightcrime.org/component/k2/item/1999-18-criminals-die-for-each-soldier-mexico>
- {3} <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=291994>
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