

OPERATION MARTILLO AS A TOOL TO REDUCE DRUG TRAFFICKING
IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE COUNTRIES (EL SALVADOR,
GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS)

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by

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WHINSEC
2017

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

OPERATION MARTILLO AS A TOOL TO REDUCE DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE COUNTRIES (EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS) BY MAJ John H. Ramírez, 91 pages.

The Transnational Organized Crime that Central America is facing with drug cartels and criminal street gangs becomes a threat to the national security of the United States. The countries of the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have become the bridge and the base of operations for these criminal organizations that use land, sea and air routes to move the drugs through Mexico with the final destination the United States. Because of this threat, it is important to establish a good security cooperation program with the countries of the Northern Triangle, a program that includes training and equipment to be more effective in the fight against drug trafficking across their territories. The Northern Triangle countries need to be committed with the United States in their fight against drug trafficking and the transnational criminal organizations and they need to establish a partnership where there is mutual cooperation. Also, these countries need to work jointly with the United States agencies in this region to increase drug interdictions. The plan of Operation Martillo is important to achieve this strategy to reduce the traffic of drugs through the countries of the Northern Triangle.

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ACRONYMS

CARSI	Central America Regional Security Initiative
FY	Fiscal Year
JIATFS	Joint Interagency Task Force South
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
PNC	National Civilian Police
SCO	Security Cooperation Office
TAC	Transnational Anti-Gang Unit
TOC	Transnational Organized Crime
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
U.S.	United States
USSOUTHCOM	United States Southern Command

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Central America faces significant security challenges. Criminal threats, fragile political and judicial systems, and social hardships such as poverty and unemployment contribute to widespread insecurity in the region. Consequently, improving security conditions in these countries is a difficult, multifaceted endeavor. Since U.S. drug demand contributes to regional security challenges and the consequences of citizen insecurity in Central America are potentially far-reaching—as demonstrated by the increasing number of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees arriving at the U.S. border—the United States is collaborating with countries in the region to implement and refine security efforts.

— Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke
Congressional Research Service 7-5700, R41731

If we ignore these threats, these problems, and these crises in Central America today, we will address them on our own front porches tomorrow.

— Assistant Secretary William R. Brownfield

Problem Statement

Transnational organized crime (TOC) has been significantly affecting Central America and, in particular the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Despite the fact that each of these countries has its own internal problems that differ from one to the other, the incapacity to fight these criminal organizations currently represents an enormous challenge for all of them. Organizations engaged in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking, along with gangs, smugglers, and other criminal groups are a threat to the government, the armed forces, and the citizens and, in particular to security and law in these countries.

These Northern Triangle countries need assistance in security cooperation to be able to fight, deter, and degrade TOC through the, targeting of different areas. The

Department of Defense (DOD) provides assistance through the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) by means of several plans and programs established to assist all the countries in the Area of Responsibility (AOR) in their fight against TOC.

The Department of State (DOS), through the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), provides training and advice to the national police forces of the Northern Triangle countries. There are also other agencies like the Department of Justice (DOJ) through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) that focus on the traffickers and the drugs being trafficked into the United States (U.S); the Anti-gang Unit from the FBI that targets the criminal street gangs operating in the Northern Triangle countries; the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) that focuses on border protection and the interdiction of the drugs before entering the U.S.

Finally, the assistance that is provided by the Department of Treasury Financial Crimes as in the fight against TOC targeting money laundering is very important. These three Northern Triangle countries have become the transshipment point for drugs coming from the major producers Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, followed by Ecuador and Venezuela. Recently, the production in these countries has increased and consequently the trafficking in Central America has also expanded through the use of criminal groups such as, criminal street gangs, drug cartels and others maintaining open routes in order to continue drug shipments to Mexico with the U.S. as, the final destination.

Title 10 USC, Chapter 15: Military Support for Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies grants the DOD the authority to provide support for Counternarcotic (CN)

activities to other departments, agencies, or foreign law enforcement agencies.¹ These agencies assist with operational support, training, infrastructure construction, maintenance, detection, monitoring, and communication. Other agencies and programs such as International Military Education and Training (IMET), The Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School (NAVSCIATTS), and The Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA) among many others, also provide the resources and proficiency that allow the Northern Triangle countries to disrupt the routes of narco trafficking and assist in the fight against other kinds of TOC. The objective of these agencies is to create stability and security for the government, the armed forces, and the citizens of these respective countries.

Primary Research Question

What are the effects achieved in the reduction of drug trafficking through the security cooperation offered by USSOUTHCOM with Operation Martillo in Central America, specifically in the Northern Triangle Countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala?

Secondary Research Questions

The second research questions and sub-questions expand the evaluation and analysis of this investigation.

¹ U.S. Congress, “Chapter 15—Military Support for Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies,” *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016*, 2016, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ92/PLAW-114publ92.pdf>.

1. What are the strategic considerations of the USSOUTHCOM regarding Operation Martillo and the impact on the reduction of drug trafficking in countering TOC in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras?
2. Is Operation Martillo effective in reducing drug trafficking in the Northern Triangle countries by seizing drugs during transportation?
3. Is there any indication that the security cooperation given to the Northern Triangle countries by USSOUTHCOM through Operation Martillo in order to reduce drug trafficking is affecting the operations of the TOC?

Assumptions

The Northern Triangle countries as well as other countries of Central America are transshipment hubs for the cartels and the criminal organizations used to move drugs, arms, and humans through this region to the final destination of North America.

Transnational organized crime operates in these countries with the assistance of gangs, corrupt government officials, businesses used for money laundering, and citizens. Many citizens of these countries are unemployed and live in poverty lacking the economical means support their families and thereby, becoming an easy target for recruitment to illegal activities. The following assumptions are therefore of use the evaluation and analysis of the primary research question and the secondary research questions:

1. Transnational organized crime has control of the areas of the Northern Triangle countries which are used to move their illicit drugs to the U.S.
2. Transnational organized crime has control of many sectors of the population in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala offering assistance to those affected by unemployment and poverty.

3. Transnational organized crime is supported by a network of intelligence working against the governments of the Northern Triangle countries which, gives them an operational advantage in the region by evading the authorities and the law.
4. The armed forces lack capability, and the corrupt national police of the Northern Triangle countries do not have the means, capacity, or training to combat the threats of TOC.
5. Transnational organized crime will continue to use gangs for support in the Northern Triangle countries in order to perform all kinds of unscrupulous work such as, killing, extortion, protection, and also assisting with smuggling drugs into U.S.
6. Security cooperation provided to the Northern Triangle countries will disrupt TOC and minimize the illicit traffic of drugs to the U.S. and the Caribbean, and will also improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the armed forces and the national police of these countries.

Definitions

Arms Trafficking – also known as gunrunning, is the illegal trafficking or smuggling of contraband weapons or ammunition.

Criminal Street Gang – any group, club, organization, or association, whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity, which they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation, frequently by employing one or more of the following: a common name, slogan, identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical marking, style or color of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign or graffiti; and whose purpose in

part is to engage in criminal activity and which uses violence or intimidation to further its criminal objectives.

Drug Trafficking – sale and distribution of illegal drugs.

Human Trafficking – the illegal movement of people, typically for the purposes of forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation.

Illegal Drug Trade - a global black market dedicated to the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of drugs that are subject to drug prohibition laws.

Illicit Trafficking – the illegal “trading, selling or dealing” in specified goods.

Money Laundry – the process of transforming the profits of crime and corruption into ostensibly legitimate assets.

Narco Trafficking – the smuggling and distribution of illegal drugs.

Security Cooperation – all Department of Defense interactions with foreign defense establishments to build defense relationships that promote specific U.S. security interests, develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.

Transnational Organized Crime – any organized crime coordinated across national borders, involving groups or networks of individuals working in more than one country to plan and execute illegal business ventures. In order to achieve their goals, these criminal groups use systematic violence and corruption.

Transporters – persons that transport and distribute large quantities of one or more illicit drugs.

Transshipment Hubs – places where the transfer from one conveyance to another for shipment takes place.

Scope

Transnational organized crime is established in Central America and particularly in the Northern Triangle countries. The Department of defense, DOS and many other agencies, some of which are mentioned above, are providing security cooperation aid to these countries through different programs and with the extensive participation of USSOUTHCOM. Some of the programs include: Operation Martillo, The Central America Regional Security initiative (CARSI), The Central American Maritime Regional Initiative (CAMRI), The Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, and The U.S. - Colombian Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation (USCAP).

The scope of this research focuses on the Northern Triangle countries; even though each one of the Central American country plays a different and important role in the fight against transnational crime, only one initiative is selected from, the many existing in order to maintain a manageable scope. The selected program is Operation Martillo which targets drug trafficking. The time span limited to the years 2010 through 2016 when the program had more impact and the results of the security cooperation offer better scope for analysis.

Limitations

As previously mentioned, the focus of this research paper is focused on the ongoing security assistance provided to the Northern Triangle countries by the DOD through USSOUTHCOM. The main limitations therefore are that Operation Martillo

contains classified information that cannot be published hence, the information about Operation Martillo will be collected from open sources that detail the analysis, resources and results in the fight against transnational organized crime. For this reason, this information may be limited.

The second limitation refers to the lack of accurate internal results provided by the Northern Triangle countries receiving security cooperation through the DOD and the DOS. Also, no classified data will be used in these research paper.

Delimitations

This research focuses on the specific time period between the years 2010 through 2016 and primarily within the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. This is a more manageable time frame in which to analyze and evaluate the results in security cooperation assistance that Operation Martillo has produced in these countries. Additionally, while the focus of this research paper is on the security cooperation against TOC, the majority of the results are concentrated on illicit drug trafficking, and thus focus on other areas like arms trafficking and human trafficking is limited. Focus is maintained upon how the security cooperation through Operation Martillo assisted these countries in their efforts to reduce illicit drug trafficking in their region and the capability of the armed forces and the national police in fighting these international and local criminal organizations.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because the illicit trafficking of drugs is a threat to the national security of the U.S. The United States Southern Command has an important

interest in assisting the Northern Triangle countries in fighting TOC in the region to stop the illicit trafficking of drugs from reaching the U.S. Furthermore, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala also have a vested interest in providing stability within their own countries and providing security for the civilian population against the threat of these criminal organizations and gangs.

It is also important to emphasize the importance of security cooperation programs that assist the Northern Triangle countries. It is possible to analyze the ways in which, in the case of Operation Martillo, these programs are affecting the criminal organizations and helping these three countries to be more effective and efficient in the fight against these criminal groups.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Central America is located at a very strategic point between North and South America, and of considerable importance are the countries of the Northern Triangle, making this a strategic region for criminal groups to use as a bridge for drug trafficking, weapons smuggling and the illegal entry of individuals into the U.S. This region has gone through many periods such as political and military changes, as well as economic and social instability which have led to it accommodating many criminal risks. In addition, the region is too weak to confront well organized criminal organizations.

This instability in the Northern Triangle countries has contributed to the deterioration of the region, and is also threatening the security of the population in the area. This situation has become an opportunity for TOC and street gangs to establish routes in order to continue narco trafficking to the United States. Furthermore, these criminal organizations have expanded in the region and created their own territories through the use of violence in order to maintain power in these areas and maintain the illicit trafficking. In addition, the corruption of government officials has led to lack of citizen confidence in the governments.

Much has been written by many organizations and for many different reasons regarding the problems of the Northern Triangle countries because they play a major role in the stability of the region and in the fight against organized crime. The objective of this research paper is to provide a perspective on security cooperation in Central America with particular regard to the Northern Triangle countries and Operation Martillo. It can then be used for future research papers that are related to security cooperation.

Criminal Threats

The transnational organizations in Central America represent a challenge for the U.S. because these criminal organizations have contributed to the instability of the region and jeopardize the interests of the U.S. and they are also a threat to national security. These criminal organizations have taken advantage of the regional instability in order to establish themselves in the Northern Triangle countries to conduct illegal activities that provide them with economic power. In addition, the weaknesses of the government institutions in fighting these organizations make them more powerful and they are almost unrestricted in conducting their activities.

These organizations tend to have diversified into performing multiple illegal activities in order to obtain their economic power. Those activities include, but are not limited to, crimes that impact people's daily lives such as extortion, robbery, rape, and small-scale drug distribution. They also include transnational criminal activities such as money laundering, weapons smuggling, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking.² These many activities mean that the Northern Triangle countries struggle to contain these criminal groups with the law. Another contributing factor is the proximity of these countries to Mexico, and the strong pressure from the Mexican cartels to maintain the traffic routes through Central America and the large ungoverned territory. The Colombian drug cartels also continue to exert pressure with regard to maintaining the routes from South America to the U.S.

² Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), accessed November 5, 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf>.

Background of the Drug Trafficking Organizations

Drug trafficking became more intensive in the 1990s. Colombian drug cartels sent their cargo all the way through Mexico to the U.S., but over the years with the fight against drug trafficking and the implementation of Plan Colombia, there has been a fierce struggle to eliminate the drugs cartels in Colombia. This has led to the cartels mutating, also known as the cockroach effect, and opening up to seek new horizons and regions in which they are able to freely operate. Traffickers now use overland smuggling, littoral maritime trafficking, and short-distance aerial trafficking through Central America instead of directly transporting cocaine from South America to Mexico (see Figure 1).³

The Northern Triangle has become the base or the bridge for transporting cocaine from some of the countries of South America such as Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru to the major routes leading to the U.S. Furthermore, Venezuela has become a safe place for the movement of cocaine to Central America and, in particular to Guatemala and Honduras. This mutation resulting from, the pressure exerted upon the Colombian and Caribbean drug cartels has led to the increase in drug trafficking in Central America. Added to this problem is the trafficking of opiates, methamphetamines and other types of drugs, which have also found their way through Central America to the U.S.

³ Ibid.

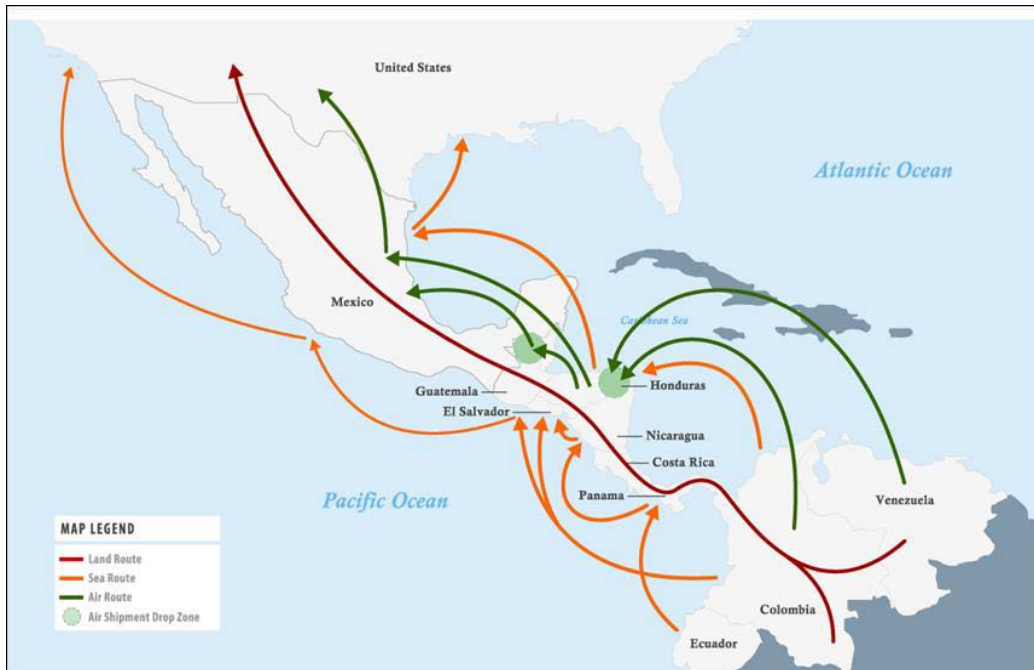


Figure 1. Northern Triangle Air, Land, and Sea Routes for Illicit Trafficking to United States

Source: Douglas Farah and Carl Meacham, *Alternative Governance in the Northern Triangle and Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2015), 7, accessed March 21, 2017. http://csis.org/files/publication/150911_Farah_AlternativeGovernance_Web.pdf.

Drug trafficking organizations (DTO) found new ways to continue to meet the demand for drugs coming from the U.S. and settled in the Northern triangle countries in order to continue their operations in combination with the drug cartels of Mexico. When these organizations were established in Central America, they were divided into two groups; the administrators who were normally the drug cartels of Mexico, and the transporters who moved the drugs through the territory of Central America.

Due to the elimination of drug cartels in Colombia, the struggle for the control of drug trafficking in Central America has increased and led to struggle between the

different groups seeking to dominate the market. In addition, the influence of the Mexican cartels has increased considerably and new drug trafficking organizations such as the Sinaloa and Zetas cartels have emerged. These drugs cartels have taken control of the countries of the Northern Triangle and have allied themselves with other criminal organizations for the protection, movement and enforcement of the passage of drugs into the U.S.

Other Criminal Organizations

Other criminal organizations have joined this lucrative market, in order to support the cartels of Mexico and to establish themselves as drug distribution centers and conduct other criminal activities. One of the criminal groups that have joined is the street gangs, whom represent another major problem for the countries of the Northern Triangle. These gangs are sorted into territorial areas as organized criminal groups; who struggle to maintain their own territory and their illicit business has caused a rise violence between these groups and the civil population.

Criminal gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Mara 18 (M-18), who operate in the countries of the Northern Triangle, have contributed to the instability of public security, and are in a constant struggle with the armed forces and the national police of these three countries. Gangs that have been organized over the years have formed their own command and control networks. Local police assert that a national leadership hierarchy exists, with larger “programmes” (MS-13) or “tribes” (M-18) giving direction to local “cliques” (MS-13) or “courts” (M-18). In MS-13, it is even alleged that

there is a top leader called “Master Homie” an anonymous figure who keeps a very low profile.⁴

There are also the following criminal organizations that influence the instability and security of the countries of the Northern Triangle that do not receive the publicity or have not been assigned as much importance as the DTOs. These street gangs deal in: human trafficking, arms trafficking, alien smuggling and money laundering. These are only a few of the additional activities, among others, which represent a problem for the countries of the Northern Triangle.

Some of these groups only specialize in one type of crime such as money laundering, while others have a larger field of action that includes different types of illicit activities. Furthermore, these groups have penetrated the governmental institutions and have economic power, manpower, and connections that they have created through the region through acquiring alliances with high officials in the government, with the military forces, and with the national police. This means that they have a network that supports their illegal operations in their respective countries and in the region.

It is evident then that countries of the Northern Triangle are affected by a variety of illicit crimes that have led to security instability in all regions due to the influence of the DTOs, street gangs and other organizations. This demonstrates that the countries of the Northern Triangle are in need of assistance in security cooperation in order to be able

⁴ United Nations, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A threat assessment* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, September 2012), 1-82, accessed April 13, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

to fight these criminal organizations and return stability and security to the citizens in their countries and the region.

Northern Triangle Security Cooperation Assistance

The problem with international, regional or local criminal organizations in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle countries has led the U.S. government to take action in order to protect the safety of North American citizens, U.S. borders, and the interests of the U.S. in the region. In an effort to provide assistance with security cooperation to these countries, the U.S. government has created strategies to address the problems in the fight against TOC.

There are many factors faced by the Northern Triangle countries such as unhealthy economies, poverty, unemployment, and limited military and police capabilities which means they are unable to confront this TOC unaided. Central America alone cannot address these challenges without the support of the international donor community. An approach is required that will encourage private sector investment and combine the financial, intellectual, and human resources of North American governments, Colombia, the European Union, and multilateral development banks.⁵

The White House, the DOD through USSOUTHCOM, and the State Department through INL have been involved in providing security cooperation assistance to the countries of the Northern Triangle. Plans have been developed to assist in the fight against TOC such as, Operation Martillo, CARSI, The Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity

⁵ White House, "U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America," White House, Press, 2015, accessed November 5, 2016, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/central_america_strategy.pdf.

in the Northern Triangle and the U.S.-Colombian Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation. These plans include training, schools, equipment and advice for the armed forces and the national police of these three countries.

Operation Martillo

Operation Martillo is an alliance between the United States, and Europe and the Western Hemisphere in an effort to counter drug trafficking and its routes through Central America and the Caribbean. This operation is an interagency effort that includes the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. federal law enforcement agencies, and the military and police forces of the Northern Triangle countries, among others. They work together to achieve the interception of drug shipments through the marine, air and land routes in Central America.

Operation Martillo has become critical for the U.S. government's ability to meet the objectives of and support the White House Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime. Since the implementation of the plan on Jan 15, 2012 has yield considerable results; Operation Martillo has supported the seizure of 693 metric tons of cocaine, \$25 million dollars in bulk cash, the detainment of 581 vessels and aircrafts and the arrest of 1,863 detainees arrested.⁶ These results are due to the collaboration of the members of the plan who have concentrated on the fight against these criminal organizations operating in Central America.

⁶ United States Southern Command, "Operation Martillo," United States Southern Command, 2016, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.USSOUTHCOM.mil/newsroom/Pages/Operation-Martillo.aspx>.

The positive results of Operation Martillo have been achieved with the collaboration of the countries of the Northern Triangle, by preventing the passage of drugs through the isthmus of Central America and combating these threats to local, national, and international to increase security. As Rear Admiral Charles D. Michel, Director of the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) said, “all the nations along the Central American isthmus, the United States, European partners, Canadians, etc., have been working more closely than ever in my 30 years or so working this particular problem set, as a direct result of Operation Martillo”.

The Central America Regional Security Initiative

The Central America Regional Security initiative was the result of an earlier plan established by the Bush administration in 2007; this plan was first called the Merida Initiative and its main objective was the fight against criminal organizations in the regions of Mexico and Central America. This plan established a good interrelationship between of communication between the police agencies. The plan also supported the reforms necessary to continue the enforcement of the law, and the protection of the civil population and human rights.

In 2010, the Obama administration separated the Central America portion of the Merida Initiative and renamed it CARSI.⁷ This was how CARSI began to provide the seven countries of Central America with equipment, training, and technical assistance in

⁷ United States Government Accountability Office, *Status of Funding for the Central America Regional Security Initiative* (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2013), accessed April 15, 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/660/651675.pdf>.

supporting the national police to enforce the law with organized criminal organizations, maintain relations with these countries, and also increase their capabilities in regard to the security and stability of the region. The five primary goals of CARSI are to:

1. Create safe streets for the citizens of the region;⁸
2. Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and among the nations of Central America;⁹
3. Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments;¹⁰
4. Establish an effective state presence, services, and security in communities at risk; and¹¹
5. Foster enhanced levels of coordination and cooperation among the nations of the region, other international partners, and donors in order to combat regional security threats¹².

In addition, CARSI also provided specialized police units vetted by the U.S. government to collaborate and work with U.S. federal agencies in the fight against street gangs. This work and collaboration was coordinated with the FBI to create the first Transnational Anti-Gang (TAC) units in 2016 in El Salvador, but subsequently due to an

⁸ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

increase in gang members and their movement towards other parts of the region, TACs have also been established in Honduras and Guatemala.

TAC in El Salvador assisted the FBI in arresting and extraditing the first member of MS-13, who was put on trial in the United States. These TACs have given the Northern Triangle countries the ability to combat the different types of crimes affecting the region such as money laundering, trafficking of persons, drugs and weapons, and in addition support for investigations of violent crimes and bulk cash smuggling. Finally, this plan has also been very effective in combating international criminal organizations and in supporting the Central American nations with training, equipment, and counseling so that they are able to combat these criminal organizations.

The Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle

The alliance of this plan is based on the collaboration of the countries of the Northern Triangle with the support of the White House. The main objectives of the plan are to increase economic development, to locate criminal networks that operate in these countries and are responsible for human trafficking, to promote education in the population and to assist governments in creating government institutions free of corruption.

The plan also aims to create training centers in communities that have a high risk of crime, to encourage young people to acquire job skills, and to live in a safe and stable environment. In addition, the three countries agreed to create audit mechanisms to combat corruption in government. This is another plan that is providing security cooperation in order to improve the security and stability of the region.

The U.S. - Colombian Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation

In the year 2012 at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Cartagena, Presidents' Santos and Obama announced an Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation to support capacity-building in Central America, the Caribbean, and eventually West Africa.¹³ The U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation was created to support this presidential initiative and the DOD and DOS were directed to institute the plan.

The plan was assigned to USSOUTHCOM who were to manage the coordination and development with the countries included in the plan. As Colombia has a great deal of experience in the fight against illegal groups and narco-terrorist organizations, due to the assistance that was given to Colombia through Plan Colombia which, provided equipment, training, and advisors from the U.S., the agreement with the government of Colombia was to pass on this experience and build the capacity to fight TOC in central America.

The main priorities of the plan are: Narco trafficking, combating crime, strengthening institutions and fostering resilient communities. Colombia provides training with Mobile Training Teams (MTT), Colombian military schools, subject matter experts (SME) and joint operations in order to accomplish these priorities. Since the implementation of the plan in 2013, the assistance to Northern Triangle countries that are members of the plan has been tripled. This effort, has been coordinated between the

¹³ Arlene B. Tickner, "Colombia, the United States, and Security Cooperation by Proxy," Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), March 18, 2014, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/colombia-the-united-states-and-security-cooperation-by-proxy/>.

government of Colombia with its armed forces and police, the USSOUTHCOM through its members, the U.S. Security Cooperation Office (SCO) in Colombia and INL.

Miscellaneous

The difficulty faced by the Northern Triangle countries is based on the power struggle of criminal organizations to control the drug market. The corruption involves not only high level government officials but also members from different ranks of the national police and armed forces. Often, when attempting to write on these topics the focus has been more on the issues of drugs while other factors that influence the instability and the lack of security in the region have been disregarded.

The security cooperation assistance is extremely valuable in disrupting TOC, and helping the governments build the capacity of the military and police forces to be both efficient and proficient in the fight against the criminal organizations. It is necessary also, to recognize that the illicit trafficking market represents billions of dollars for these organizations and they have the flexibility to move from one region to another. This means that TOC, the DTO, street gangs and others criminal organizations are likely to prevail in the region by continuing to mutate in order to stay in illicit business.

The responsibility that the U.S. government has is not only to try to maintain the security and the stability in the region in order to protect U.S., but also to remain one step ahead of these criminal organizations in order to dismantle them as they appear and move from one country to another.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper attempted to answer the thesis research question: What are the effects achieved in the reduction of drug trafficking through the security cooperation offered by USOSUTHCOM with Operation Martillo in Central America, specifically in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala? The secondary questions were also answered in order to support the first inquiry question and the results it generated.

To support the research questions, it was necessary to analyze the situation with regard to the countries of the Northern Triangle in order to understand the problems they face including the criminal organizations that operate in this region, such as TOC, DTO, street gangs, and other criminal organizations that are affecting the security and stability of these three countries. This, complete analysis of the situation was required in order to compare how the assistance in security cooperation being provided to these countries through Operation Martillo is affecting these criminal organizations and the countries of the Northern Triangle.

The methodology of qualitative data research was therefore used to support this research, collection and analysis of information provided by articles from different open sources such as Insight Crime, Congressional Research service, and the Central Intelligence Agency among others, were used. The analysis of this information over the past five years will systematically lead to understand if there has been any progress with Operation Martillo and whether it has been efficient with drug interdiction in the Northern Triangle countries and the research question will be answered. All this

information will give a better view of the actual situation of the countries in the Northern Triangle region and any improvements in their fight against narco trafficking.

Subsequently, it will demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of Operation Martillo in the reduction of drug trafficking and how TOC has been affected.

In order to undertake an analysis of this caliber, it was important to use documents from open sources from entities with high reputations within the U.S. government. Consequently, journals, facts sheets, reports, and articles from the White House, DOD, DOS, USSOUTHCOM and other credible organizations were utilized. Research was concentrate on the information provided by these organizations in reference to TOC in the countries of the Northern Triangle. In addition, the security cooperation assistance through Operation Martillo is reaching these countries was quantified along with the existing differences between each respective country receiving this help to fight organized crime. The question of whether the armed and police forces are operating efficiently and effectively was reviewed with the assistance of the U.S. government.

The information provided by the different organizations was compiled and analyzed to establish similarities and differences in reference to the security cooperation assistance being given to the countries of the Northern Triangle. Results in the fight with the criminal organizations in each country were compared to ascertain whether they expected results are being achieved and whether they are fulfilling the objectives of the different plans that have been assigned to each one of these three countries. Finally, the results provided by the Northern Triangle according to the assistance provided by USSOUTHCOM with Operation Martillo were presented.

As previously mentioned, only appropriate open sources have been used to answer the main question and sub-questions of the thesis. To achieve this objective the method of analysis used was that of a literature review in order to determine whether the available sources supported the results provided by the countries of the Northern Triangle with regarding to the assistance with security cooperation that they are receiving from USSOUTHCOM with Operation Martillo.

The countries of the Northern Triangle have been receiving aid from different programs and plans in their fight against TOC, street gangs and other criminal organizations for many years. This means that there are sufficient sources of information regarding the results for each country and the ways in which this assistance affects the security and stability of the respective countries. These many sources of information are extremely advantageous to the performance of an effective analysis along with an evaluation of the results of this security cooperation assistance and a comparison of which plan has been most effective and efficient in which country.

If, with the information acquired through credible sources it can be demonstrated that reliable results have been obtained against the fight against TOC and that there is now more stability and security in this region, then the assessment can be made that the security cooperation assistance has been positive for the region.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

A part of the administration's Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime, Operation Martillo leverages several features of USSOUTHCOM and its AOR as part of the U.S. Central America Regional Security Initiative.

— John D. Gresham
Defense Media Network

This research analyzed whether the results of Operation Martillo have been as expected with regard to the reduction of drug trafficking in the Northern Triangle countries. In addition, it analyzed whether the security cooperation given to these three countries is in line with the strategic objectives of USSOUTHCOM for Central America, and also the indications as to whether Operation Martillo has been effective into reducing drug trafficking in the Northern Triangle countries.

The research results also help to, establish whether the program has an ongoing future and whether the support given to these Northern Triangle countries could be extended in order to continue the fight against drug trafficking until a degree of security and stability is achieved in this region.

It is necessary to take into account that national strategies on drug trafficking are delegated to the respective agencies that conduct the missions; beginning with the DOD which lends its support to other agencies, such as, the Combat Commander of a region, in this case USSOUTHCOM, aligned to provide support for security cooperation in the region of Central America. Other U.S. government departments also, provide support for the fight against drug trafficking such as the DOJ and DOS; which also have plans and

programs to support the Central American region in the fight against TOC organizations and the reduction of drug trafficking to the U.S.

Taking into account that one of the major consumer of drugs internationally, is the U.S., it remains the principal destination for the cartels from South America who bring the drugs through Central America and the Caribbean to the U.S. These cartels have continued using Mexico as the primary transshipment route for delivering the drugs into the U.S., the difference now is that the main routes used by TOC from South America and Mexico are Central American routes because the fight against drug trafficking in the Caribbean has been effective. This has meant that the drug trade has been shifting to Central America.

The shifting of the drug trade to Central America and especially to the Northern Triangle countries is, however, due only partially to the pressure that was employed in the Caribbean to reduce the trafficking of drugs; there are additional factors that affected this transition such as, the political, economic, and social instability of this region which, has affected the countries and their citizens. TOC has taken advantage of the instability to move its drug trade and use the Northern Triangle as a new transshipment routes for moving the drugs to Mexico with the final destination as the U.S.

As these DTO adapt and change the way they operate, the U.S. government must also adapt and examine the best strategies, regarding the implementation of plans and programs to combat these criminal organizations and reduce illegal drug trafficking to the U.S.

View of the Northern Triangle Countries

In order to analyze why criminal organizations have moved to the countries of the Northern Triangle, it is necessary to understand that their geographic positions are strategic for the movement of drugs as are the internal situations of the countries. The internal instabilities create an area suitable through which to conduct illicit traffic using people affected by poverty and the criminal street gangs that operate in these countries as a means of transportation, protection and distribution of drugs to the U.S.

Central America is a privileged region that connects North America with South America; in addition, the location of Central America is strategically important because this region is bordered on each side by the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea enabling criminal organizations to move their shipments of drugs via the sea to the countries of the Northern Triangle (see Figure 2). Two of the countries that play a major role and that connect to Central America through drug trafficking are Colombia in the south and Mexico in the north.

Figure 2 also demonstrates, the proximity of the islands of the Caribbean to Central America making it an additional channel for the drug trafficking routes. The interconnectivity of this area used by TOC is ideal since shipments of drugs can be moved via land, sea, or air. As a result, fighting against drug trafficking in this region is very difficult and a great deal of effort is required to reduce it. In addition, countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua that do not support the strategies of the U.S. in the fight against drug trafficking, make fighting DTO on Central America even more complicated.



Figure 2. Political map of Central America and the Caribbean region

Source: Freeworldmaps.net, “Political map of Central America and the Caribbean region,” accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.freeworldmaps.net/caribbean/>.

The drug trafficking situation in Central America and the Caribbean is becoming more complex every day; The DTO have modernized and become sophisticated over the years making it more difficult for the U.S. and Central American countries to fight against these organizations. In addition, the drug market has opened new horizons reaching Canada, Europe, and Asia. This expansion continues, however, to use the routes of Central America, and El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have become centers for the passage and distribution of drugs to North America.

Consequently, it is evident that the geographic position of these three countries represents a strategic area for the DTO as intermediary bases for the transportation and distribution of drugs to North America. In addition, the political, social, and economic situations of these countries are also used by these criminal organizations to establish themselves in the region where they are able to operate almost freely.

Another important factor that contributes to the importance of the Northern Triangle countries for DTO is that these countries do not have security stability and the capabilities of military or police forces are limited. The ambiguity between the role of military forces and the police is a growing concern in Central America's Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.¹⁴

The disparity between these three countries and DTO is large. These criminal organizations find themselves at a greater advantage than the government. They have better armaments, the economic capacity to pay citizens and the criminal street gangs, and they can also work underground. On the other hand, the military and police forces are governed by laws and budgets and; lack training in the fight against drug trafficking. They also have other missions at the national and local level that they are required to fulfill. All of these factors influence the fact that there is not complete support from the government in the fight against drug trafficking.

This situation makes it more difficult for the political, military and police leaders to confront drug trafficking without external support. In addition, each country in the Northern Triangle experiences a different situation despite being in the same region and sharing borders. These differences, whether political, social or economic affect the coordination of the fight against drug trafficking. Following the situations in each country.

¹⁴ Gene Bolton, "El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the Northern Triangle, Whose Citizens are Caught in Crossfire," *Lista the Smart News Source*, October 23, 2012, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://latinalista.com/columns/globalviews/el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras-the-northern-triangle-whose-citizens-are-caught-in-crossfire>.

El Salvador

This Northern Triangle country has less territory than Guatemala and Honduras and a population of a little more than six million. El Salvador has experienced a series of events which have affected its internal stability. Bearing in mind that this country endured a civil war with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) left-wing group that lasted for twelve years, and despite the fact that peace was signed in 1992, El Salvador has never regained stability and the internal struggle to do so with regard to politics and national security continues to this day.

El Salvador has not been saved from the problem that affects all of Central America and has been infiltrated by both TOC and criminal street gangs. There is some evidence that the Mexican drug cartel the Zetas may have infiltrated El Salvador, although only in extremely low numbers. El Salvador has hundreds of gangs “cliques,” with more than 20,000 members. Violent and well-armed, U.S.-style street gang growth continues, with the 18th Street (Barrio 18) and MS-13 (“Mara Salvatrucha”) gangs being the largest.¹⁵ All of this has been a factor in the increased instability of security in El Salvador and DTO use these criminal street gangs as their means of protection and transportation for the drugs arriving from South America.

The alliance of criminal gangs with the cartels of Colombia and Mexico also forms a complicated situation for the struggle against narco trafficking in El Salvador. This poses a state of affairs that is very worrying for the government of the U.S. and in

¹⁵ United States Department of State, “El Salvador 2015 Crime and Safety Report,” United States Department of State, 2015, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=17691>.

recognizing the threat posed by MS-13, the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated the MS-13 a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) in their list of Specially Designated Nationals.¹⁶ This means that these criminal street gangs that operate in El Salvador have progressed from being a local threat to representing a national and transnational threat; they are already considered groups belonging to TOC.

This alliance between drug cartels and criminal street gangs represents a major problem for El Salvador as it faces the trafficking of drugs across its territory as well their sale and distribution by gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18. Drug trafficking, corruption, and a proliferation of illicit firearms, coupled with high levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, have contributed to the current situation.¹⁷ These alliances also represent a major challenge for the Policia Nacional Civil or the National Civilian Police (PNC) and the military forces of El Salvador since they do not have the equipment or personnel to fight these organizations.

The PNC is hampered by inadequate funding and limited resources, and as a result of perceived corruption, do not enjoy the confidence and cooperation of much of El Salvador's citizenry.¹⁸ The PNC has approximately 16,000 men and the military is comprised of almost the same number of personnel. In El Salvador, the work of a police

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Clare Ribando Seelke, *El Salvador: Political and Economic Conditions and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013), accessed March 18, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21655.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

officer has become extremely dangerous, because they have become the targets of criminal street gangs and the DTO; and also, as the job is not well paid to, it is not considered a very advantageous choice for ordinary citizens. PNC officers typically earn less than \$500 per month in the beginning of their careers, which is not adequate remuneration for a job with high risk; and in addition, lacks the of support of the population due to the instances of internal corruption.

Due to the situation faced by the PNC, that is the lack of adequate budget, equipment, and personnel; measures must be taken to monitor areas or accomplish work that cannot be executed by the PNC. El Salvador routinely calls on its military to supplement the PNC in its duties.¹⁹ El Salvador has an area of just over twenty-one thousand square kilometers, which must be policed in order to prevent to prevent drug trafficking in its territory, whether by land, sea or air (see Figure 3) but the country currently lacks personnel and funds to fight the criminal organizations.

This analysis of El Salvador demonstrates that, it is a vulnerable country with flaws in internal security regarding the protection of its borders, its population, and the security of the nation itself. These vulnerabilities exploited by DTO and criminal street gangs who use the territory for illicit drug trafficking. The DTO operate almost without restrictions, which has led to increased insecurity and violence as they attempt to gain control of the drug trafficking routes to Guatemala en route to North America. It is for

¹⁹ Insight Crime Foundation, “Investigation and Analysis of Organized Crime, El Salvador,” Insight Crime, 2016, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/el-salvador>.

this reason there is the need to provide security cooperation assistance to the government and its defense institutions in order to support the fight against TOC.



Figure 3. Cocaine Trafficking Routes in El Salvador

Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region, accessed March 18, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

Guatemala

Guatemala, as one of the three countries of the Northern Triangle, also plays a very important role because of its geographic location as it shares the border of southern Mexico. This border has an extension of 928 kilometers (577 miles) and geopolitically represents much of the western and northern boundary of the Central America region within North America.²⁰ It is also a border that is used by DTO and criminal street gangs for the transportation and passage of drugs to North America.

²⁰ Tim Johnson, “Headless Corpses Spark Worries on Mexico's Southern Border,”

Other geographically strategic factors for the TOC are that Guatemala has two oceanic entrances; one for the Pacific Ocean and the other for the Caribbean Sea representing maritime routes used by these criminal organizations to introduce drugs through vessels into Guatemala. Moreover, the borders with El Salvador and Honduras facilitate the interconnection between them so that the DTO coordinate the transport and the distribution of the drugs entering either through El Salvador or Honduras towards Mexico.

Guatemala has a territorial extension of a little more than one hundred and eight thousand square kilometers, almost five times bigger than El Salvador and with a population that exceeds sixteen million people. This country has also been subject to unstable internal security due to drug trafficking in its territory a situation shared with the other two countries of the Northern Triangle, and it maintains a constant fight against these criminal organizations by attempting to reduce this drug trafficking. Other factors besides geographic location affect Guatemala's internal security and are also used by the DTO in order to facilitate their operations in Guatemala.

Like other Central American countries, Guatemala has gone through years of internal political and military struggles. These struggles have led to different types and trends in government. In addition to this, 36 years of war with a guerilla organization, have left traces of instability in the country's security. In 1996, the government signed a peace agreement formally ending the internal conflict, which had left more than 200,000

McClatchy Newspaper, accessed March 18, 2017,
<https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24640627>.

people dead and had created, by some estimates, about 1 million refugees.²¹ These conflicts have also contributed to the continuation of internal problems within Guatemala, which have been exploited by criminal organizations in order to infiltrate their territory to illicitly traffic drugs.

As in other countries of Central America, poverty is a predominant factor in Guatemala. This means that the population must obtain other forms of economic support for themselves and their families. Guatemala is the country with the largest population in Central America and it also has the highest population growth rate in Latin America, which is likely to continue because of its large reproductive-age population and high birth rate.²² This represents a social problem for the government.

Gangs have also affected national and population security through the struggles of the cartels to maintain power and a government that is not prepared to offer the population the necessary economic, social, and health resources as well as employment opportunities for new generations. Almost half of Guatemala's population is under the age of 19, making it the youngest population in Latin America.²³ This is a very important factor as criminal street gangs are nourished by the unemployed youth DTO use them as mules to bring the drugs into the U.S. affecting U.S. national security and increasing illegal immigration to the country.

²¹ Central Intelligence Agency, the World Factbook, "Guatemala," accessed February 18, 2017.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

As in El Salvador, alliances between DTO and criminal gangs' control of the drug trafficking territory have increased crime in Guatemala. Officials have estimated that up to 60 percent of Guatemalan territory may be under the effective control of drug traffickers.²⁴ This territorial control further complicates the situation for the armed forces and police in the fight against drug trafficking. In addition, the security forces do not have the resources or of the funds to confront these criminal groups.

As in other Central American countries the PNC do not have the training, the equipment, or the trust of the citizens necessary to fight these criminal groups. The lack of support from both the citizens and the government makes the work of the PNC unattractive and neither does he job have sufficient benefits. The average PNC officer ought to have at least a high school degree but often times has much less, and is often equipped with as little as six months of police training before being sent out on the streets, receiving only \$535 per month as salary.²⁵ This lack of support profoundly affects the PNC's professionalism and ability to oppose these criminal organizations.

Owing to the increase in criminality and violence that is confronting the PNC, a number of municipalities have requested military troops to augment their ineffective police forces. The Guatemalan government, as under the previous four administrations, is therefore using a constitutional clause that allows the army to “temporarily” support the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ United States Department of State, “Guatemala 2015 Crime and Safety Report,” United States Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security, 2015, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=17785>.

police in combating rising crime.²⁶ This has given a little more support to the fight against drug trafficking which is made harder by the economic, personnel and equipment capacities of the DTO operating in Guatemalan territory.

Another common factor between Guatemala and the Northern Triangle countries is that DTO and criminal gangs have taken advantage of the weakness of the PNC and, the armed forces along with a weak judicial system in order to carry out illicit operations almost without restriction. This has led Guatemala to becoming a major transit territory for drug trafficking (see Figure 4), from South America to North America. This situation also means that Guatemala is a center for other illicit activities, such as the trafficking of human and arms, and also money laundering.

As previously mentioned these criminal groups have taken advantage of every weakness in Guatemala to settle in the territory dividing it up for illicit operations and territorial control by the different cartels and criminal street gangs. Additionally, drug cartels in Mexico have been partnering with drug cartels in Guatemala to maintain control of cocaine trafficking to the U.S.

²⁶ Maureen Taft-Morales, *Guatemala: Political, Security, and Socio-Economic Conditions and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), accessed March 18, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42580.pdf>.

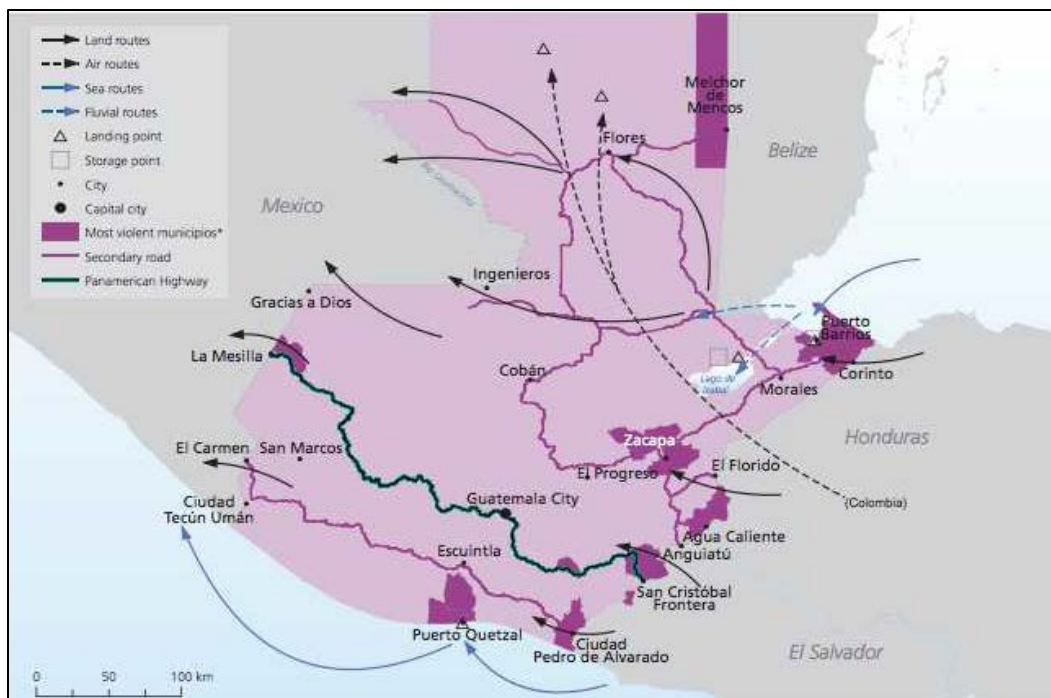


Figure 4. Cocaine Trafficking Routes in Guatemala

Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region and national police data
 *Selected among the municipalities with highest homicide rates (<100 homicides per 100,000 population), accessed March 18, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

The Mendoza crime family in the north is currently aligned to the Cartel del Pacífico, while Lorenzanas in the south are aligned to the Zetas which may create considerable friction as trafficking routes intersect.²⁷ These alliances have made Guatemala not only a transit point for drugs to the U.S., but also a logistical bridge and drug storage point for these criminal groups.

²⁷ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, accessed March 18, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

These cartels are in dispute over the territory of Guatemala as, the country represents a very strategic point for the control and transportation of drugs to North America which has resulted in the division of the country by the drug cartels (see Figure 4). In addition to the cartels, the criminal street gangs also represent another major problem for the PNC and the armed forces as they also retain a large share of the drug trafficking, either by providing protection to the cartels or through the local distribution and sale of drugs.

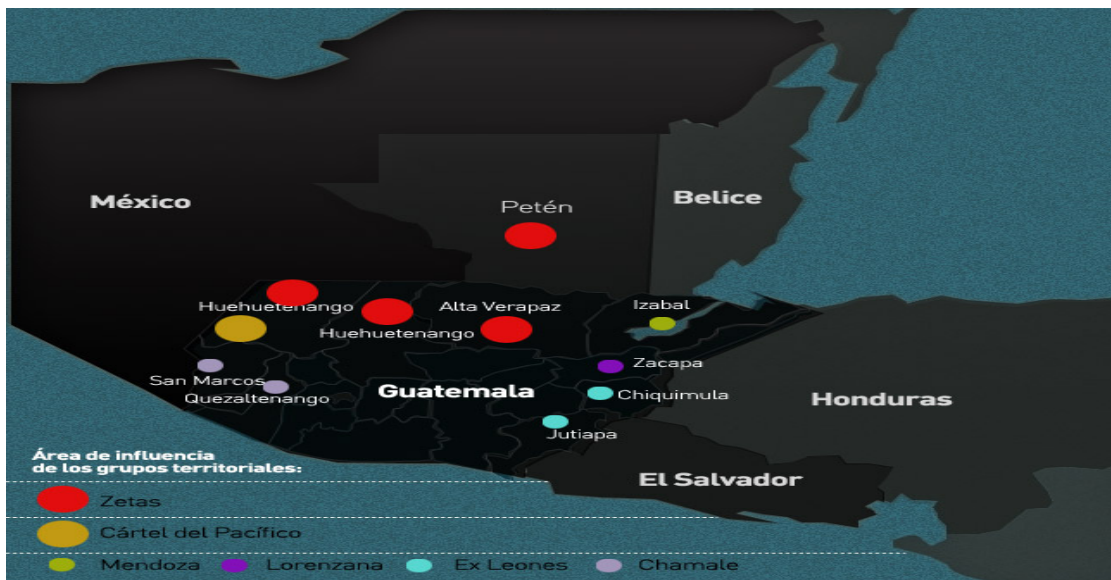


Figure 5. Territorial Drug Cartels in Guatemala

Source: InSight Crime, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/map-of-mexican-cartel-presence-in-central-america>.

Most of these criminal street gangs such as MS-13, M-18, Barrio 18 or others have a characteristic in common, and that is that they are composed of young people. This is the result of the lack of opportunities in education and employment, and many

youths are recruited or voluntarily join criminal street gangs. They also compete for territorial control within Guatemala. For these street gangs, territorial control is about identity, about “respect,” and about their place in the world.²⁸ This contributes another problem to the national security of Guatemala and creates a complex situation for the PNC and the military in their fight against drug trafficking and control of the national territory.

This analysis of the security and narco trafficking situation in Guatemala demonstrates the problems that Guatemala faces as one of the countries of the Northern Triangle. Guatemala is vulnerable to DTO and criminal street gangs owing to its social, economic and political situations. As a consequence, criminal organizations operate in the territory almost without restrictions and with alliances with other drug cartels from Colombia and Mexico maintaining Guatemala as an important route for the transportation and distribution of the drugs into the U.S.

It is also evident that without outside assistance, it will be difficult for the PNC and the armed forces to fight against the DTO and criminal street gangs. This is why it is of the utmost importance to provide a plan to help Guatemala in the fight against narco trafficking.

²⁸ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*.

Honduras

The third country that makes up the Northern Triangle, Honduras, has also suffered from social, economic and political instability as in the case of, El Salvador and Guatemala. The history of fighting against leftist groups in the region combined with military governance for many years has effected repercussions that continue to this day and has influenced Honduras' internal security instability. Along with the other countries in Central America, Honduras is also affected by the lack of economic resources, educational opportunities, and social services available to its citizens. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and has the world's highest murder rate. More than half of the population lives in poverty and the per capita income is one of the lowest in the region.²⁹ This has recently changed but it still has one of the world's highest murder rates. This contributes even more to the instability of the internal security in the nation.

Honduras is also located in a strategic area of Central America making it highly suitable for the DTO to traffic drugs through its territory to Guatemala and North America. It is bordered by the Caribbean Sea which is also strategically useful given its proximity to the Caribbean islands. There is also access to the Pacific Ocean through the Gulf of Fonseca which is located between El Salvador and Nicaragua. Honduras shares its borders with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua complementing the interconnectivity of the Northern Triangle as a strategic area for the illegal operations of the DTO.

²⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, "Honduras," accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ho.html>.

With a territory of little more than one hundred and twelve thousand square kilometers and a population approaching the nine million people, it is also a country that is poverty stricken and which lacks all kinds of opportunities for its citizens. This situation has been exploited by DTO and criminal gangs and, recruitment and the methods of operating in the territory of Honduras are the same as in El Salvador and Guatemala. Neither has it been spared the internal corruption of the government nor does the security force which have also contributed to the lack of internal insecurity in the country.

Along with the other countries of the Northern Triangle and owing to the political, social, economic and corruption situations, Honduras has also become a port of entry for the transit of drugs to North America. This situation has also led to other illicit activities such as human trafficking, arms trafficking and money laundering as a result of this instability. All of these factors represent a very complex situation for the government, the national civilian police, and the armed forces in the fight against TOC in the territory of Honduras.

The national police and military forces also have something in common with El Salvador and Guatemala; and that is that they do not have the funds, personnel, training or equipment to fight DTO and criminal street gangs. In addition, Honduras' police force is one of the most corrupt in the region. Along with demanding bribes, passing information to criminal groups, and allowing drug shipments to pass unchecked, some Honduran police have reportedly participated in, and even directed, violent criminal

operations.³⁰ This has led to a critical national security situation and civilian population caught between the internal corruption of the government and the violence of the criminal groups.

According to a 2016 poll, 59 percent of Hondurans did not trust the national police, while the armed forces had a disapproval rating of 43 percent.³¹ Subsequently, owing to this situation, the Honduran government has begun to use the armed forces in the role of police to fight against drug trafficking within its territory. Despite this use of the armed forces, DTO and criminal street gangs continue to operate in Honduras with almost no restrictions, having turned Honduras into a violent country and a transit point for drug trafficking operations into North America.

Honduras has become an area with a variety of routes used by drug cartels (see Figure 6), for the transit of drugs from South America to North America. This has also led to drug cartels and criminal gangs in Honduras fighting for control of the territory in order to maintain power over the distribution of drugs to the U.S. where a large market of consumers is found. According to the State Department, approximately 90 percent of the cocaine trafficked to the U.S. in the first half of 2015 first transited through the Central America and Mexico corridor.³² As can be seen in Figure 6, Honduras is the drug entry

³⁰ Insight Crime, “Investigation and Analysis of Organized Crime, Honduras,” accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.insightcrime.org/honduras-organized-crime-news/honduras>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Peter J. Meyer, Congressional Research Service, Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34027.pdf>.

bridge to Guatemala where drug trafficking is consistently increasing due to the continued instability and internal corruption of the government.

This leads to another important factor which is the drug cartel alliances, such as the drug cartels of the Pacific and the Zetas, which similarly to; criminal gangs, such as MS-13 and Barrio 18, are fighting with each other to maintain control of the territory in order to keep the routes open for each of their drug cartels. Honduras is faced with, a complex situation in which, many of the criminal organizations operating in the territory, whether they are local drug cartels (see Figure 7), or Mexico drug cartels are also strongly influencing the instability and violence in Honduras (see Figure 8), and the criminal street gangs are spread across the entire country.

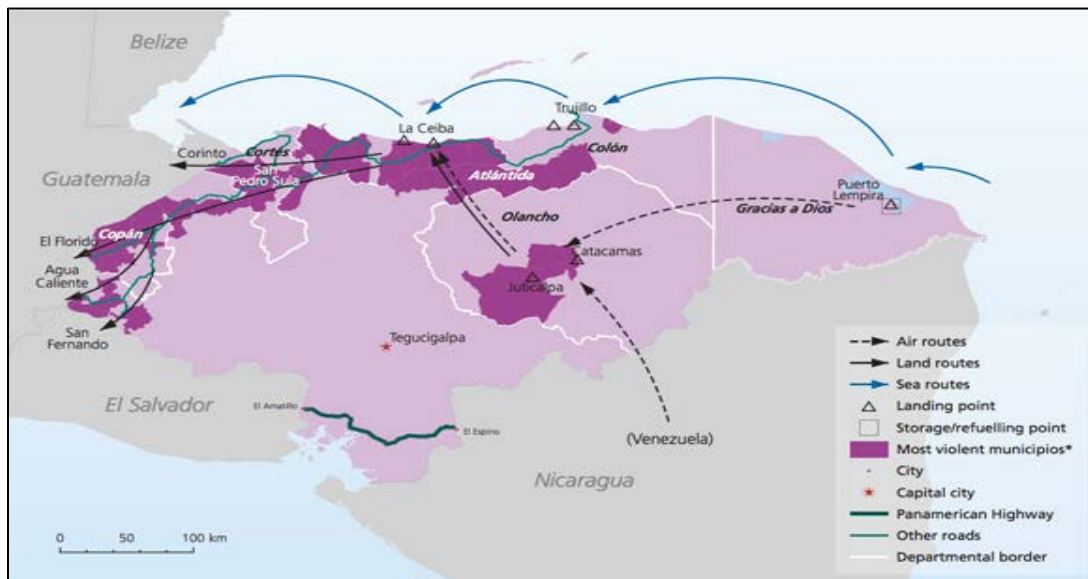


Figure 6. Cocaine trafficking routes in Honduras

Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region and national police data
 *Selected among the municipalities with highest homicide rates (<100 homicides per 100,000 population), accessed March 18, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

As long as these internal fights for the control of the territory continue between drug cartels and criminal gangs, the violence in Honduras will continue and it will be more difficult for the police and the armed forces to fight against drug trafficking. The effects of these fights will also have implications for the other two countries of the Northern Triangle, making this part of Central America very unstable with regard to the security of the region and the U.S.



Figure 7. Territorial Distribution of Local Drug Cartels in Honduras

Source: Bing.com, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://i1.wp.com/www.insightcrime.org/images/2015/June-2015/AmapHonduras.png>.



Figure 8. Areas of Operations for Mexican Drug Cartels

Source: InSight Crime, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/honduras-home-to-the-new-ciudad-juarez>.

In this ongoing struggle in which Honduras has maintained itself for many years, the government has tried to improve the police and the armed forces in order to combat DTO and criminal street gangs. These criminal organizations are, however, well-armed and able to use at continuous flow of money to bribe officials, buy arms on the black market and attract unemployed young people thus; making it much more difficult for the national police of Honduras (PNH) who are poorly equipped, poorly trained and who are unfortunately also seen as corrupt to fight effectively against these organizations.

As already evidenced in El Salvador and Guatemala, Honduras also has the same problems of internal insecurity and violence within the country due to drug trafficking. These problems are also due to corruption, a lack of economic opportunities, and the majority of the population living in poverty which has resulted in these criminal

organizations seizing the territory for their illicit operations. For these reasons, it is important that Honduras also receives the external aide of security cooperation in order to be able to fight drug trafficking.

Security cooperation must focus on the fight against drug trafficking and the internal security of the country. The objective is to reduce traffic through the internal routes that go towards Guatemala and North America; and concentrate on operations of interdiction and judicialization against these criminal organizations, that is, both on local drug cartels and Mexican drug cartels that have influence and operate in Honduran territory. It is important, also, to focus on combating criminal street gangs in order to disrupt alliances with drug cartels. This helps reduce drug trafficking through the Northern Triangle and provides security stability in the Central American region.

Strategies for the Northern Triangle Countries

Drug trafficking in Central America has increased over the years as it has become a very lucrative source of income for criminal organizations. It has been lucrative for both the drug cartels and the criminal street gangs which have exploited the instability of Central America brought about by, the lack of employment opportunities, education and economic development. The countries of the Northern Triangle are in the midst of internal fighting for the control of the territory by these criminal organizations whether they are Zetas, the Pacific Cartel, or the Gulf Cartel that come from Mexico also seeking territorial control. In addition to this, there are also the local Cartels and criminal street gangs such as MS-13, Barrio 18, and M-18 who also strongly desire to control the territory and the drug trafficking.

Everything has a cause and an effect therefore it is evident that the largest consumer of drugs is the U.S. and the largest producers of cocaine are in South America resulting in the need to find a means of transportation. The drug cartels of South America need to transport the cocaine to the U.S. in order to sell it and receive the profits of its production. On their trafficking routes, these cartels encounter a source of people who live in poverty, lack education and who do not have the essential sources of income necessary to satisfy their basic needs, making it easy for these criminal organizations to recruit a sufficient amount of people for their illegal activities.

Adding to the complexity of this situation, in addition to the social instability of the countries of the Northern Triangle, there is corruption among some members of the government, the police and the armed forces which contributes to the increase in drug trafficking in this region every day. In the end, however, not only is the Central American region destabilized, but the situation becomes a threat to the internal security of the U.S. Consequently, since drug trafficking in Central America is tied to the consumption of cocaine, among other drugs, in the U.S., and is affecting the country, the U.S. needs to have a strategy to help the countries of the Northern Triangle in the war against drugs.

The strategy to combat drug trafficking should, not only impede the trafficking of these drugs to the U.S., but also help combat the violence in the countries of the Northern Triangle caused by drug trafficking and the fights for the territorial control. As can be observed almost daily in the news, drug trafficking appears to be increasing every day and this increase contributes to additional criminal activity with more violence and crimes related to drug trafficking. The strategy of the U.S. with the countries of the Northern Triangle must be one of mutual commitment whereby the DTO and criminal

gangs are tackled and at the same time the drug consumption in the U.S. decreases in order for this fight to be successful.

Recognizing that drug trafficking is an enemy that constantly stalks the U.S., the government's effort must be large and unified and requires the participation of the different entities of the state such as; the White House, DOD, DOS and other departments (where federal and state agencies are included) coordinating and contribute to the fight against drug trafficking in Central America in order to prevent its entry into the U.S. The U.S. must also foster relations with the countries of the Northern Triangle with not only diplomats, but also with their police and armed forces; supporting them with training, equipment, subject matter experts exchange (SMEE), and with intelligence providing accurate information on drug cartels and criminal street gangs. Only with participation, coordination and intelligence sharing can the police and armed forces of these three nations effectively combat drug trafficking in their respective countries and region.

Beginning the U.S. strategy for drug control is, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), which is a direct entity of the White House and one of its main objectives is the reduction of illicit drug trafficking. This agency also establishes priorities and monitors the results of the drug trafficking strategy; the ONDCP 2016 report is an example of this. This report states that several cocaine indicators focusing on availability and initiation appear to be moving in the wrong direction, including a doubling in Colombian coca cultivation from 2013 to 2015 and a 27 percent increase in the number of Americans initiating use of cocaine (601,000 in 2013 to 766,000 in

2014).³³ This report indicates that the government is taking the strategy into account and that the results of their changes as a result of their policies are documented.

The 2010 Strategy identified three policy objectives with regard to domestic drug trafficking and production. The Strategy called for ONDCP and its interagency partners to focus on coordinating federal drug enforcement initiatives with state, local, and tribal entities; securing U.S. borders; and addressing specific drug problems as they arose.³⁴ The U.S. government has established domestic policies for the fight against drug trafficking and domestic drug production, and these policies have been proven to work and produced results since law enforcement agencies began to enforce them. This indicates that the government is taking the initiative with a problem that affects a large section of the population of the U.S. and which also threatens national security.

The question is whether the strategy for the fight against drugs in Central America, especially for the countries of the Northern Triangle, is working and producing the expected results with regards to reducing the trafficking of drugs which then enter the U.S. The complexity that exists in working with these countries with different cultures and, social problems along with, poverty, corruption and government instability must also be considered. In addition, the TOC that operates in this region is dealing with different drug cartels and criminal street gangs, and each one has its own objectives regarding territory control and drug distribution in the Northern Triangle and this diversification affects the strategies of the fight against these criminal organizations.

³³ White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy 2016*, accessed February 4, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34027.pdf>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

The assistance that the U.S. has given to Central America has been occurring for many years and it has intensified in the last decade. The U.S. government has given international assistance in security assistance through plans such as the Merida Initiative and Plan Colombia which focused on assistance in the fight against TOC. Its objective has been to reduce drug trafficking in the Central American region by providing assistance with training and equipment to these countries and by providing accurate intelligence information with regard to DTO and criminal street gangs.

Financial assistance to Central America in these campaigns has been very important in the fight against TOC. The Merida Initiative a security partnership between the U.S. and Mexico that includes \$1.5 billion in foreign assistance – was announced in October 2007; it also included a proposal of \$50 million of U.S. assistance for Central America. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2008, Congress appropriated \$60 million in security assistance for Central America.³⁵ In 2008, the appropriation of the funds for Central America was separated from the Merida Initiative and subsequently directly managed by CARSI. Since 2008, \$361.5 million in security assistance has been appropriated to Congress under CARSI.³⁶ (see Table 1).

³⁵ United States Senate, *International Narcotics Control, Responding to Violence in Central America*, 112th Cong. Sess., accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/a/6/a67575d5-66dd-4e36-a4ae-6a4f70de500a/4858AA22CC7C1104366351F9C88DACD3.violence-in-central-america-5-15-12.pdf.

³⁶ Ibid.

Table 1. Central America Security Initiative Funding

FY 2008	\$60 million
FY 2009	\$105 million
FY 2010	\$95 million
FY 2011	\$101.5 million
FY 2012	\$100 million (President's Request)
Total Appropriated by Congress	\$361.5 million
Total Including FY 2012 Request	\$461.5 million

Source: U.S. Department of State, June 2011, accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/a/6/a67575d5-66dd-4e36-a4ae-6a4f70de500a/4858AA22CC7C1104366351F9C88DACD3.violence-in-central-america-5-15-12.pdf.

Another plan that has influenced the fight against drug trafficking is Plan Colombia. One of the objectives of Plan Colombia is the fight against drug trafficking using fumigation for the extermination of coca leaf plantations. In response to Plan Colombia, and in consultation with the Colombian Government, President Clinton proposed a \$1.6 billion package of assistance to Colombia. Adding to previously approved U.S. assistance to Colombia of over \$330 million, the new initiative requested \$954 million as an emergency supplement for FY 2000 and \$318 million in additional funding for FY 2001.³⁷ Much funding has been invested in the fight against drug

³⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, "Plan Colombia," Council on Foreign Relations, March 28, 2000, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://www.cfr.org/colombia/plan-colombia/p28004>.

trafficking since 2000 with Plan Colombia (see Table 2), since 2007 with the Merida Initiative, and 2008 with CARSI, and these are only three among many more programs that have been established in the fight against drug trafficking. Despite the above financial efforts, we continue with this fight against drug.

Table 2. Plan Colombia Fiscal Year Appropriations 2000 through 2008

U.S. Assistance under Plan Colombia and the PCCP by Program Objective—Fiscal Year Appropriations 2000 through 2008										
Dollars in million										
Program objective/fiscal year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008 (Est.)	Total
Reduce Illicit Narcotics and Improve Security	\$ 817.8	\$ 232.8	\$ 395.9	\$ 607.9	\$ 617.7	\$ 585.6	\$ 587.3	\$ 591.1	\$ 423.4	\$ 4,859.5
Promote Social and Economic Justice	\$ 80.0	\$ 0.5	\$ 109.9	\$ 125.7	\$ 126.5	\$ 124.7	\$ 130.4	\$ 139.7	\$ 194.4	\$ 1,031.8
Promote Rule of Law	\$ 121.1	\$ 0.9	\$ 15.8	\$ 27.0	\$ 9.0	\$ 7.3	\$ 10.5	\$ 7.8	\$ 39.4	\$ 238.7
Total	\$ 1,018.9	\$ 234.2	\$ 521.6	\$ 760.6	\$ 753.2	\$ 717.6	\$ 728.2	\$ 738.6	\$ 657.2	\$ 6,130.0

Source: United States Government Accountability Office, “Plan Colombia,” accessed February 4, 2017, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0971.pdf>.

The Northern Triangle countries continue, however, to suffer the results of drug trafficking (especially cocaine) through their territories causing violence among the population. It was assumed that these plans that were focused on the fight against drug trafficking in Mexico and Colombia would also reduce cocaine trafficking in Central America. The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report of September 2015, disclosed, that the three countries of the Northern Triangle El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are the countries in which the transit of drugs in Central America was among the highest.

Additionally, since to the culmination of Plan Colombia and the decision of the Colombian government in May of 2015 to stop the fumigation of coca crops, coca cultivation in Colombia has increased. According to the UNODC and Colombia Government's report released recently, an increase of almost 40 percent in the coca crop area has been recorded from 69,000 hectares (ha) in 2014 to 96,000 ha in 2015 (see Figure 9). Furthermore, this figure is twice the size of the coca cultivation surface in 2013, which was 48,000 ha.³⁸ This significantly contributes to the increase of drug traffic through the territory of the countries of the North Triangle.

The U.S. government estimates that approximately 90 percent of the cocaine trafficked to the U.S. in the first half of 2015 first transited through the Mexico and Central America corridor.³⁹ This indicates that the flow of drug traffic continues through this region of Central America despite the years of struggling to eradicate it. It is important to take into account the strategies for Central America that are also part of this fight against the DTOs. These strategies must continue because of the threat of TOC that continues to operate in this region and whose operations will continue as long as there is a high demand for drugs in North America and other parts of the world.

³⁸ UNODC, *Coca Crops in Colombia Increase Almost 40 percent over One Year: New UNODC Report*, accessed February 4, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2016/July/coca-crop-in-colombia-increases-almost-40-per-cent-over-one-year_-new-unodc-report.html?ref=fs1.

³⁹ United States Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, United States Department of State, March 2016, accessed February 4, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253655.pdf>.

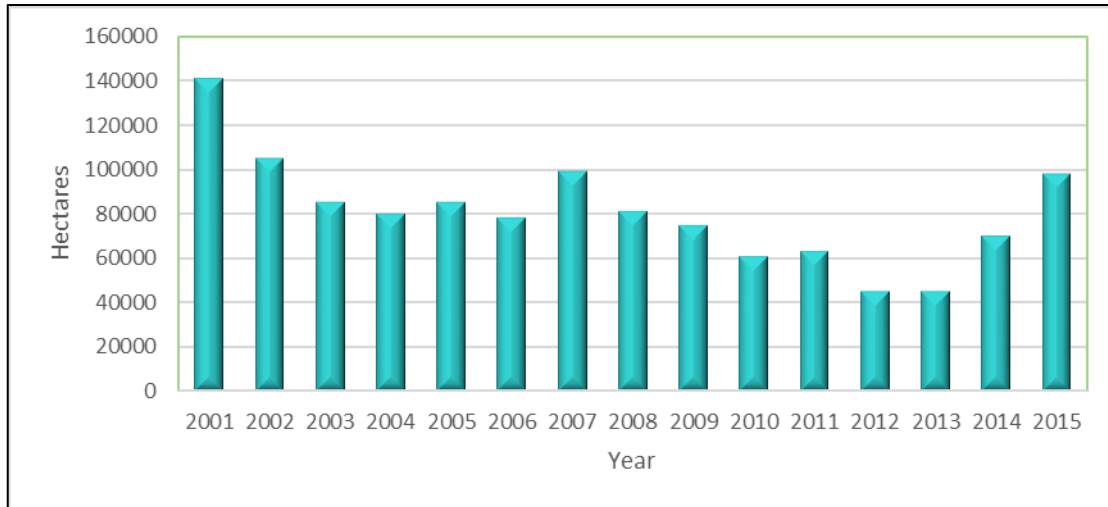


Figure 9. Historical Series of Areas with Coca at December 31, 2001–2015

Source: UNODC, Colombia Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2015, accessed February 4, 2017, http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Monitoreo_Cultivos_ilicitos_2015.pdf.

DTO and criminal gangs will continue to threaten the region until a suitable security cooperation plan is implemented and it will require the support of USSOUTHCOM to combat these criminal organizations; through operations, training, equipment, and funding in order to continue attempting to eradicate drug trafficking throughout the territory of the Northern Triangle. The support provided in security cooperation to these countries will be reflected in the decrease in their current levels of violence and decrease in the flow of cocaine into the U.S. as stated by Admiral Tidd, the Commander of USSOUTHCOM, in his Senate Armed Service Committee posture statement:

In concert with our law enforcement, intelligence community, diplomatic, and regional partners, we remain focused on countering transnational organized crime (CTOC). Our Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) is at the forefront of

our efforts to combat the illicit drug trade and to illuminate the networks engaged in this nefarious activity.⁴⁰

This also requires a strong relationship with the Northern Triangle countries and a commitment to fight against these criminal organizations to stop drug trafficking in this region.

In order to analyze the strategies that exist for the countries of the Northern Triangle, it is necessary to examine what actions USSOUTHCOM is taking to foment a partnership with these countries and whether the operations are garnering results and the flow of drug traffic is diminishing. These partnerships are important because they focus on the specific problems of the region and also identify what practices are being conducted and that are producing results in the fight against DTO and criminal street gangs. As previously stated cocaine traffic has not diminished in the region, the cartels along with criminal street gangs like MS-13, Barrio 18, and others are in a battle for control of the territory and the distribution of drugs.

The United States Southern Command's efforts to continue its support for the security cooperation strategy were observed in Colombia on July 5, 2016 when Admiral Tidd met with the ministers of defense from Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with the objective of maintaining a dialogue of defense and security in Central America's Northern Triangle countries. The participants reviewed lessons learned and successes to date, exchanged ideas on information sharing and strategies for improved regional cooperation, and examined ways in which their countries could better transfer

⁴⁰ Admiral Kurt W. Tidd. Posture Statement before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Forces Committee, March 10, 2016, accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tidd_03-10-16.pdf.

knowledge to each other.⁴¹ It is extremely important that the countries involved in this fight against drug trafficking recognize the problem associated with it, both internally and internationally, and unite in a constant fight for the interdiction and eradication of drug trafficking in the region.

The U.S. and USSOUTHCOM strategies are important because they guide the fight against drug trafficking organizations. Equally important is the creation of a strategy through a joint partnership with the countries involved that includes assistance with training, advising, and equipment, and most importantly, the implementation of joint operations against narco trafficking in the region. This strategy is not short-term; on the contrary, it will take many years to be effective and to yield the results due to the differing factors affecting the countries of the Northern Triangle. These factors are, as previously mentioned; the economy, poverty, corruption, unemployment, and the instability of the governments in one way or another affect the fight against drug trafficking. This is why plan like Operation Martillo is so important, through its support of the of U.S. and USSOUTHCOM strategies for the interdiction of drugs in the region of the Northern Triangle, and the most important and ultimate objective to counteract the threat to national security and the citizens of U.S.

⁴¹ Diálogo, Digital Military Magazine, Forum of Americas, “U.S. Joins Northern Triangle Security Dialogue Hosted by Colombia,” accessed February 4, 2017, <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/us-joins-northern-triangle-security-dialogue-hosted-colombia>.

The Results of Operation Martillo in the Northern Triangle Countries

As part of the strategic efforts of DOD and USSOUTHCOM in combating the TOC in Central America, Operation Martillo was established in January 2012 as part of CARSI. The objectives of Operation Martillo are to prevent drug trafficking in Central America through interdiction. It is a complex military exercise involving the deployment of the U.S. military, the U.S. Coast Guard, law enforcement and partner nation vessels, aircrafts, soldiers, sailors, and police along the region's Pacific and Atlantic coasts.⁴² With the coordination of all these agencies, the flow of drugs coming from the countries of South America through the Central America routes can be stopped.

This is a very complex operation due to the participation of the many following entities that support Operation Martillo on behalf of the DOD, the components of USSOUTHCOM – Army South (ARSOUTH), Naval Forces South (NAVSOUTH), Marines Forces South (MARFOSOUTH), and JIATFS; the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) - Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Coast Guard (CG); the DOJ – Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA); DOS – INL. In addition to these entities, the seven countries of Central America, which includes the countries of the Northern Triangle, also participate in this operation. In addition, in support of this operation the following countries have also participated: Canada, Colombia, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

⁴² Cristina Eguizabal, Matthew C. Ingram, Karise M. Curtis, Aaron Korthuis, Eric L. Olson, and Nicholas Phillips, "Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle" (Woodrow Wilson Center Reports on the Americas #34, December, 2014), 1-155. accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/FINAL%20PDF_CARSI%20REPORT_0.pdf.

This operation is not unilateral but rather has a multiplicity of agencies that participate in a coordinated and united way, contributing the skills of each agency, in order to combat TOC in Central America. This kind of operation does, however, require a great deal of funding. The cost of the program has not been made public, though given the number of assets employed, it is likely to be well into the hundreds of millions of dollars.⁴³ This integration of entities and funding makes Operation Martillo an important tool in the attempt to reduce of drug trafficking in Central America and to combat the criminal organizations that operate in this region. Moreover, Operation Martillo meets the strategic objectives of the White House, USSOUTHCOM and CARSII in combating TOC in Central America.

Since its launch on January 15, 2012; as previously mentioned, Operation Martillo has supported the seizure of 693 metric tons of cocaine, \$25 million in bulk cash, the detainment of 581 vessels and aircrafts and the arrest of 1,863 detainees.⁴⁴ This demonstrates that Operation Martillo has been effective in the years it has been operating in the region but has it been as effective in the countries of the Northern Triangle and if so, in what form has it contributed to the reduction of drug trafficking in these three countries? In addition, the questions of whether the routes used by drug cartels in these

⁴³ Adam Isacson et al., *Time to Listen: Trends in U.S. Security Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Latin America Working Group Education Fund, September 2013), 1-32, accessed February 4, 2017, http://lawg.org/storage/documents/Time_to_Listen-Trends_in_U.S._Security_Assistance_to_Latin_America_and_the_Caribbean.pdf.

⁴⁴ United States Southern Command, "Operation Martillo," accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.USSOUTHCOM.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/Operation-Martillo/>.

countries have been neutralized and how effective drug reduction has been in this region are examined.

It is important to note that one of the most important objectives of USSOUTHCOM is to counter transnational organized crime and it has delegated this fight to JIATFS in order, to coordinate with the other agencies in combating criminal organizations and the interdiction of drug trafficking in the Central American region. As stated by Admiral Tidd, “Operations like MARTILLO not only strike a blow to powerful criminal networks, they ultimately save U.S. lives and resources by stopping hundreds of tons of cocaine, heroin, and other drugs destined for our cities and towns”⁴⁵ (see Table 3).

Table 3. Operation Martillo FY 15 Disruptions

<i>Operation MARTILLO FY 15 Disruptions</i>	
<i>Cocaine</i>	<i>192 Mts</i>
<i>% disrupted by partners</i>	<i>35%</i>
<i>Marijuana</i>	<i>62,995 lbs</i>
<i>Bulk cash</i>	<i>\$11.4 million</i>

Source: Admiral Kurt W. Tidd. Posture Statement before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Forces Committee, March 10, 2016, accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tidd_03-10-16.pdf.

⁴⁵ Admiral Kurt W. Tidd. Posture Statement before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Forces Committee, March 10, 2016, accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tidd_03-10-16.pdf.

It is evident that Operation Martillo has been very successful since beginning its operations in 2012. In particular, Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 was a very productive year when compared with the total of all operational years, in which 693 Mts. of cocaine were apprehended while in FY 15 a total of 192 Mts. representing 27.7 percent of total was seized. With reference to the total amount of bulk cash seized, Operation Martillo has captured \$25 million and in the FY15 \$11.4 million was apprehended representing 45.6 percent of the operational total. This demonstrates that the security cooperation and coordination performed over the years by JIATFS with the other agencies and the participating countries have been productive in their fight against drug trafficking in Central America.

The joint operations have been very productive owing to the interaction and mutual cooperation between all participants which leads to successes in the fight against drug trafficking and the reduction of cocaine entering the U.S. This cooperation also enable Operation Martillo to be successful in cutting off air, land, and sea routes to drug cartels and interdicting and capturing vessels, aircraft and criminals belonging to these drug cartels and criminal street gangs. In addition, this cooperation makes for a more stable Central American region with less violence and more security stability for the citizens of all these countries. It is extremely important, therefore, to support the mutual commitment of all agencies and participating countries, particularly those in the Northern Triangle, so that Operation Martillo remains effective.

The participation of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has been very important for the success of Operation Martillo and, their cooperation in this fight works to their advantage given that the drug traffic passes through their territories via air, land

or sea. Demonstrably, from the moment that Operation Martillo was implemented, on March 30 of 2012, only two months into the operation; the U.S. CG in collaboration with the Honduras Navy, intercepted and sank a semi-submersible vessel carrying drugs on the shores of the Caribbean Sea.

The operations have continued with many successes and the interdiction and capture of drugs in Central America has increased through the years. From its inception through to July 17, 2013, Operation Martillo has resulted in the seizure of 207,740 kilograms of cocaine and 37,397 kilograms of marijuana, 472 arrests, and the confiscation of 152 assets.⁴⁶ This joint work of Honduras with U.S. CG demonstrates the effective coordination of planning and execution of the interdiction on the coasts of Honduras, interrupting the maritime routes used by the cartels that move the drugs from South America towards the U.S.

There was additional success in 2012. Through to the joint work that took place between Guatemala, Honduras, and the U.S. in operations between April and July on the shores of these Northern Triangle countries, more than 2,340 kilograms of drugs were confiscated. The results of joint operations can therefore be judged successful and prospectively should continue to produce results. In addition, also in 2012, as part of the strategy against the fight against drug trafficking, 171 marines were sent to Guatemala to support the fight against drug trafficking in the Gulf of Honduras which is used by the Mexican drug cartel, the Zetas. These marines provided essential support to the

⁴⁶ Hector Martínez, “Honduras Participation in Operation Martillo a Success,” *Honduras News*, September 2, 2013, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://www.hondurasnews.com/operation-martillo-in-honduras-a-success/>.

Guatemalan army and the confidence that the army had the backing and support of the U.S. confronting these criminal organizations.

Other successes have been the interception of vessel carrying 600 pounds of cocaine by frigate, U.S.S. Gary, on January 4, 2013, while patrolling in support of Operation Martillo in Central America. The estimated value of this cargo on the streets of the U.S. was \$22 million dollars. In addition to this interdiction, the U.S.S. Gary personnel made three other interdictions of vessels the following week capturing 2,000 pounds of cocaine destined for the U.S. and estimated to be almost \$272 million dollars in streets value. These victories against drug cartels benefit the countries of the Northern Triangle and U.S. as the amount of cocaine entering U.S. territory is reduced and the sea routes bordering Guatemala and El Salvador are neutralized.⁴⁷

The United States Southern Command has reported that Operation Martillo has had positive effects on the Central American region and there has been a decrease in drug flow. In the map shown in Figure 10, JIATFS is evaluating the effects that Operation Martillo has had which currently reveal a decrease in the flow of cocaine from South America. Given that drug cartels use go-fast boats to move their drug shipments from South America to Central America and that approximately each of these boats can load approximately 490 metric tons of cocaine, it is evident that these drug cartels have been

⁴⁷ U.S. 4th Fleet Public Affairs, "U.S.S. Gary Seizes \$22 Million of Narcotics During Operation Martillo, Sinks Drug Boat," Navy.mil. January 17, 2013, accessed February 4, 2017, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=71503www.hondurasnews.com/operation-martillo-in-honduras-a-success/.

drastically affected and a large amount of cocaine has been prevented from entering the United States.

Operation Martillo continues to justify the scope of its operations with its successes over the years despite being barely five years old. It has proven its efficiency, for example, with the interdiction made by the Cutter Stratton in 2015 which intercepted two submarines carrying cocaine and with the combination of other operations made by the cutters Bertholf, Midgett, and Thetis and the U.S. Navy frigate, Kauffman, where 34 metric tons of cocaine were captured with an approximate value of \$1billion. These operations definitely impair the finances of the drug cartels and hence are victories in the fight against drug trafficking.

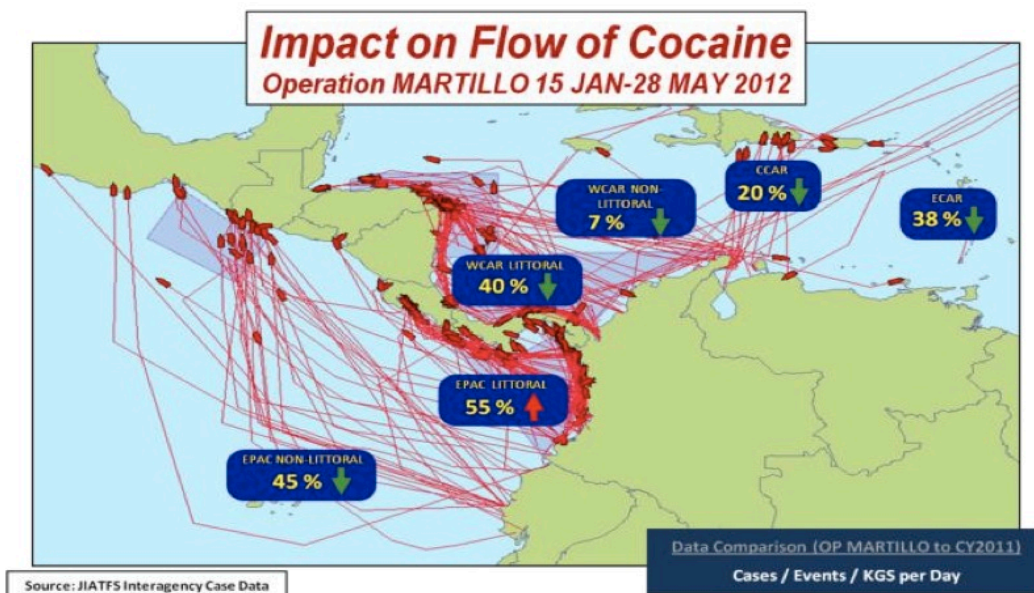


Figure 10. Impact on Flow of Cocaine by Operation Martillo

Source: InSight Crime, “Operation Martillo’ and Cocaine in Colombia’s Pacific,” accessed February 4, 2017, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/operation-martillo-and-cocaine-in-colombias-pacific>.

Operation Martillo continues to be successful in the fight against TOC impacting upon the drug cartels and, destabilizing their finances. It has also reduced the flow of cocaine through the Northern Triangle countries thereby decreasing the flow of cocaine into the U.S. It has not been an easy fight, but it has become evident that with the cooperation of the Central American countries affected by this drug trafficking in their territories and the U.S. governmental entities are in Operation Martillo much can be achieved in the fight against drug trafficking.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Transnational organized crime is a disease that has affected and will continue to affect Central America and especially the countries of the Northern Triangle. Analysis has revealed that despite being in the same region and sharing borders, the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have different internal social and economic problems such as poverty, violence, corruption, and political instability. Unfortunately, what they have in common is drug trafficking across their territories by both internal and external drug cartels such as the Zetas of Mexico, drug cartels in South America and criminal street gangs.

In analyzing the capacities of these countries to fight drug trafficking, it became apparent that local police organizations did not have the capacity to fight DTO or criminal street gangs single-handed owing to their lack of training, equipment, and low budgets. In addition, internal police corruption is also a problem. The military forces of the respective countries assist the police and the government with this drug trafficking fight but, they do not have the necessary training or budgets to do so and, in addition, they must fulfill the functions of the country's defense.

External factors have also affected the countries of the Northern Triangle in this fight, particularly the struggle between of Mexico's drug cartels, constantly fighting for control of the territory in order to be able to dominate the drug market in these countries. In addition, it is believed that the production of coca leaf cultivation has increased in the countries of South America, particularly in Colombia, after the conclusion of Plan Colombia and the Colombian government's decision to stop the fumigation of coca

cultivation fields. Coca production has increased, and this increase means that the cartels have to take larger amounts of this drug through Central America to U.S.

As a result of all these factors, the Northern Triangle countries have become a bridge and a base for drug cartels using air, land, and sea routes to transport drugs to North America. This situation has also affected the internal security of the U.S., as the flow of cocaine entering the U.S. territory via Central America has increased; the high domestic consumption in the U.S. makes the market for these criminal organizations very profitable. As a result, the strategies established by the U.S. government in order to combat drugs and to support the countries of the Northern Triangle have become very important, and security cooperation programs have been created in order to reduce cocaine trafficking to the U.S. by drug cartels and criminal street gangs.

The White House, the DOD and USSOUTHCOM have taken this fight affecting the national security and the citizens of the U.S. very seriously. This strategy is not only aimed at reducing drug trafficking towards the U.S., but is also focused on eliminating drug cartels and supporting the countries of the Northern Triangle by creating mutual agreements to support them with training, equipment, counseling, and accurate intelligence so that drug interdictions can be made and the routes used by these drug cartels obstructed, in order to eliminate the criminal organizations in the region. The implementation of Operation Martillo has been extremely important in helping the countries of the Northern Triangle to reduce drug trafficking.

Operation Martillo has been very successful since its implementation in January 2012 in supporting the strategy of the fight against drugs in Central America and reducing the flow of cocaine to the U.S. This operation, which is an integration of many

agencies, with the participation of the countries of Central America, has also been successful in its coordination, planning, and execution. Although it is an operation of great complexity due to the large number of entities that participate in it and the high budget requirement, the results have been fruitful and it has been possible to attack the organizations that deal with drugs and affect their operations.

After only five years of operation, Operation Martillo's results have been significant in the number of metric tons of cocaine that have been intercepted, the capturing of vessels, aircrafts and the amount of bulk cash confiscated, affecting the finances of these organizations. In addition, many traffickers have been detained, which has led to the neutralization of some drug cartels operating in the Northern Triangle region. As a result, over the last five years, tons of cocaine have been prevented from entering the U.S., which in the end helps save the lives of those who use this drug and also protects national security.

It can be concluded, therefore, that Operation Martillo has been successful in reducing drug trafficking in the Northern Triangle countries and should continue to produce positive results in the years to come. The support given by USSOUTHCOM through security cooperation to comply with the strategy of the fight against drug trafficking along with JIATFS support has been very effective in managing, coordinating and integrating with the other agencies and countries of Central America so this operation remains a success. This analysis also suggests, however, that Operation Martillo alone cannot be effective in this fight against criminal organizations. The fight against drug trafficking is a very complex situation as, there are many factors that influence the existence of drug trafficking.

Some of these factors influencing drug trafficking are the consumer demand that exists in the U.S. and in the rest of the world, the poverty affecting the countries of the Northern Triangle and the lack of employment opportunities for their citizens, the political and social instability of these countries and the corruption affecting parts of the police and the armed forces. For these reasons, it will require more than an operation like Operation Martillo to combat drug trafficking. This operation has been very efficient and very productive in supporting the national and USSOUTHCOM strategies for drug trafficking reduction in Central America but more is needed to meet the objectives of this strategy of aiming to reduce drug trafficking.

In order to continue the fight against drug cartels and criminal street gangs, more strategic plans should be implemented to assist Northern Triangle governments; such as additional tactical-level operations that support Operation Martillo in Central America, the Caribbean and South America; more training for the police and the armed forces of the respective countries of the Northern Triangle as where professionalism is promoted, corruption is reduced and work is directed towards the protection of the community and national security; these organizations also need to be supported with more equipment and infrastructure. Most importantly, there is the need for a mutual commitment between all departments, federal and state agencies of the U.S. and the countries of the Northern Triangle so that there is cooperation in the fight against criminal organizations operating in Central America to reduce or eliminate drug trafficking in this region and to in the U.S.

Recommendation

The issue of drug trafficking in Central America, particularly in the countries of the Northern Triangle, is a very complex one, and it is difficult to make a full analysis of

this region using only a single operation, such as Operation Martillo, to ascertain whether it has helped to reduce drug trafficking. I recommend that, future research, analyzes the impact that Operation Martillo has had in the other countries of Central America, the Caribbean and South America. Operation Martillo is not an operation dedicated only to the Northern Triangle. It would be advisable to complement this research with future studies to examine the total results in all the regions impacted and to study the results with respect to the reduction of narco trafficking and the ways in which the transnational criminal organizations have been affected.

Moreover, other operations, plans, and strategies can be used to further analyze the problem of drug trafficking. Investigations regarding how the social situation of a country and the poverty level influences the existences of drug trafficking could be undertaken; along with how criminal street gangs take advantage of this situation to recruit young people and how these youths are misled by a fictive world of money and power. Another study could be conducted on the ways in which the corruption of the police and armed forces influence this problem and what solutions would be the most appropriate in order to create a police and armed forces that are more professional and who have the support of their citizens and the international community.

Another area of study might be the political instability of at government and the ways in which it influences drug trafficking in the country and; how this situation is exploited by drug cartels to seek territorial control of a country, region, or zone. The abandonment of a region by government leaves an open field in which criminal organizations can operate almost without restrictions. There are many topics to be explored with regard to the analysis of drug trafficking in the countries of the Northern

Triangle, the rest of the countries of Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Moreover, the influence of Mexico's drug cartels plays a very important role in Central America since they have become very powerful criminal organizations, with the objective of maintaining territorial control in this region and of maintaining the power of the distribution and transportation of drugs through routes in Central America towards the U.S.

Unfortunately, with the time and the limitations that exist, a deeper and more detailed analysis on the subject of drug trafficking in Central America was not possible. It will take years of analysis due to the complexity of the situations in these countries given, each one has its own internal problems, though they share borders and have the same internal problem of drug trafficking. A recommendation for future research is to examine each country separately and research the internal problems of the country, followed by additional analysis to be gradually complemented by this research or other research in order, to gain an overall understanding of why it is probable that this region is used by DTO and criminal street gangs.

Finally, another analysis of Operation Martillo should be performed in another 3-5 years to ascertain whether it continues to have the same positive impact on drug interdiction in Central America and whether it has continued to improve the situation. Whether changes have occurred should also be examined and then compared with this analysis in order to see the difference in the results in the reduction of drug trafficking in this region. Operation Martillo is a tool that is used to fight against drug trafficking and organized transnational crime but it is a tool that must be combined with others in order to be, most effective and produce better results. Operation Martillo must continue as it is

a successful operation and according to the results the last five years continue to be successful in the fight against drug trafficking along with continued assistance of the U.S. to its partner countries of Central America.

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