

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Washington Headquarters Service, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 31-03-2010		2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) September 2009 - April 2010	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Military Assitance to Mexico: Use of Special Operations Forces				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Joseph T. Beals				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES N/A					
14. ABSTRACT The Mexican government has all but lost control of parts of its northern border and surrounding territories. Drug cartels have infiltrated these border areas along with Mexican police departments and judicial institutions. The U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFC) compared Mexico to Pakistan, calling it a possible failed state. This problem is greater than the Mexican border as many U.S. cities have a cartel presence too. Solving the security threat in Mexico is important to the United States. The best support the Department of Defense (DoD) can provide to help the Mexican government strengthen their security institutions are the skills of the U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).					
15. SUBJECT TERMS N/A					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 32	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

United States Marine Corps
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Quantico Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Military Assistance to Mexico: Use of Special Operations Forces

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Military Assistance to Mexico: Use of Special Operations Forces

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Thesis: The best support the Department of Defense (DoD) can provide to help the Mexican government strengthen their security institutions are the skills of the U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).

Discussion: Currently Mexico is facing serious internal security problems that the United States has observed closely. The Mexican government has all but lost control of parts of its northern border and surrounding territories. Drug cartels have infiltrated these border areas along with Mexican police departments and judicial institutions. The U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFC) compared Mexico to Pakistan, calling it a possible failed state. Furthermore, during March 2010, two employees of the U.S. consulate in Juarez, Chihuahua and a Mexican citizen were murdered. This problem is greater than the Mexican border as many U.S. cities have a cartel presence too. Solving the security threat in Mexico is important to the United States.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon is very aggressive in targeting the drug cartels and associated corruption and violence. Nevertheless, Mexico cannot succeed without external assistance. The 2008 Merida Initiative is a good start and provides \$1.6 billion during FY2008 – FY2010 to Mexico and Central America in order to fight drug trafficking, gangs and organized crime. Mexico requires advisory assistance in rebuilding its law enforcement capability and border interdiction capacity. U.S. SOF can augment Merida and provide expert training and mentorship in order to help the Mexican authorities consolidate and strengthen its governmental institutions and rule of law.

SOF assistance to Mexico is not free of challenges. Some analysts argue any type of military presence results in a harmful militarization of the situation. Furthermore, the U.S. - Mexico military relationship has not always been hospitable. Hence, a U.S. military presence on Mexico soil is very politically sensitive. Overcoming these issues is possible and events such as military exercises would demonstrate the willingness of the U.S. to cooperate and strengthen relationships between the two countries.

Conclusion: SOF units are the best DoD solution to support Mexico for several reasons. First, the footprint of a Special Operations unit is much smaller than that of a regular sized conventional unit that is more acceptable to Mexican authorities, and both the Mexican and U.S. populace. Secondly, SOF units are subject matter experts in specific areas helpful to Mexican situation, such as Security Assistance and Foreign Internal Defense. Lastly, U.S. SOF units have demonstrated success in similar situations in countries such as Columbia and El Salvador. For these reasons, coupled with an aggressive Mexican President and promising dialog between the U.S. and Mexico, now is the time to assist President Calderon with U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).

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Introduction

Currently Mexico is facing serious internal security problems that the United States has observed closely. The Mexican government has all but lost control of parts of its northern border and surrounding territories. Drug cartels control these areas with almost complete impunity. These cartels have infiltrated the majority of police departments and judicial institutions.¹ George Grayson asserts, “The [Mexican] government has lost control over portions of its country in a crisis similar to Afghanistan.”²

Steps taken by Mexican President Felipe Calderon to fight back are meeting stiff resistance. Despite progress in the past few years, rates of murder, kidnappings, and other violent crime have increased as the cartels respond. “The end result is a much more chaotic and unpredictable pattern of violent conflict among organized crime groups than Mexico has ever seen.”³ More than 5000 drug related deaths occurred in 2008,⁴ and reached between 6500-8200 in 2009.⁵ It is clear all individuals are vulnerable to attack. On 11 January 2010, an unknown number of men operating two vehicles abducted journalist Valentin Valdes. The following day police discovered the body of the kidnapped journalist in Saltillo. A note near the body read: “This happens to those who don’t understand the message.”⁶ This violence is disrupting the basic functions of democracy within Mexico. Max Manwaring claims, “Mexico is a state that has the procedural features of democracy but retains the characteristics of an autocracy, in which the ruling elite face no scrutiny or accountability.”⁷

Mexico requires advisory assistance in rebuilding its law enforcement capability and border interdiction capacity. The U.S. military can provide various forms of support ranging from large troop deployments to border reinforcement. The best support the Department of

Defense (DoD) can provide to help the Mexican government strengthen their security institutions are the skills of the U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). These highly trained, agile units have the specific skill sets best suited for the advisory mission. The premise behind the SOF support is to provide expert training and mentorship to help the Mexican authorities consolidate and strengthen its governmental institutions and rule of law.

Current Situation in Mexico

“Probably nowhere in the world do two countries as different as Mexico and the United States live side by side...probably nowhere in the world do two neighbors understand each other so little.”⁸ Alan Riding

From 1972-76, Mexican drug cartels controlled 75% of the US heroin market.⁹ During the 1980's cocaine replaced heroin in the U.S. market and lucrative Columbian-U.S. trafficking routes emerged. Law enforcement organizations responded and over time the U.S. authorities effectively closed down the cocaine routes from Columbia, Bolivia and Peru. This resulted in a new cocaine traffic pattern through Mexico. In 2007, this route provided 90% of cocaine to the U.S.¹⁰ and an estimated annual illicit drug revenue of \$13.6 – \$48.4 billion.¹¹

Within present day Mexico, “narco-politics has penetrated not only the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the Mexican federal government but also state governments and municipalities.”¹² Modern day drug cartels are very organized and utilize a firm business model, complete with lawyers, advertising, sales and security.¹³ In addition to the drug cartels, there are also mercenary groups, and other vigilante groups running about the country undermining if not overtly attacking the official government.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the first line of defense in fighting Mexico's crime, the police, is dealing with serious corruption issues. The Mexican police are 400,000 strong with an additional 5000 in the Federal Preventive Police.¹⁵ These extra individuals are military members on special assignment conducting counter-narcotic actions. Luis F. Aguilar, a Mexican public official, stated with respect to widespread corruption, "The tragedy is that the decomposition of the state comes from within, largely from its police whose responsibility is to apply the law fairly without exceptions."¹⁶ He asserts this situation causes "political paralysis and institutional weakness" which essentially results in a "society in search for a state" within Mexico.¹⁷ According to George Grayson, "State and local governments remain a cesspool of corruption."¹⁸ For example, there are several 'agreements' between kingpins and mayors and governors."¹⁹ Furthermore, the cartels used to bribe politicians, however now the local officials pay protection money to the cartels, "ranging from \$2,000 to \$30,000 a month."²⁰ Supposedly, the refusal to pay such a tax caused the October 2008 murder of Salvador Vergara, Mayor of Ixtapan de la Sal.²¹

It appears President Calderon's primary instrument in fighting both corruption and the drug traffickers is the military. The Mexican government battles the corruption with a military presence in most of the nation.²² Critics of the idea believe the more the military interact with the drug cartels; they too will fall into corruption.²³ Furthermore, the cartels are fighting back with terror campaigns and educating corruption. Several examples of retaliatory violence are the murder of the Commander of the Federal Police, as well as heads of eight Mexican soldiers found in a plastic bag near a shopping center.²⁴

Grayson characterizes Mexico as a country that has “strong men and weak institutions.”²⁵ Mexico is a democracy, but not without institutional challenges. There are local elections but if the “right” candidate does not win, assassinations are the remedy.²⁶ Manwaring argues, “Crediting Mexico as a democratic state is difficult as long as elected leaders are subject to corrupting control and intimidation or to informal vetoes imposed by criminal non-state actors.”²⁷

U.S. Concerns

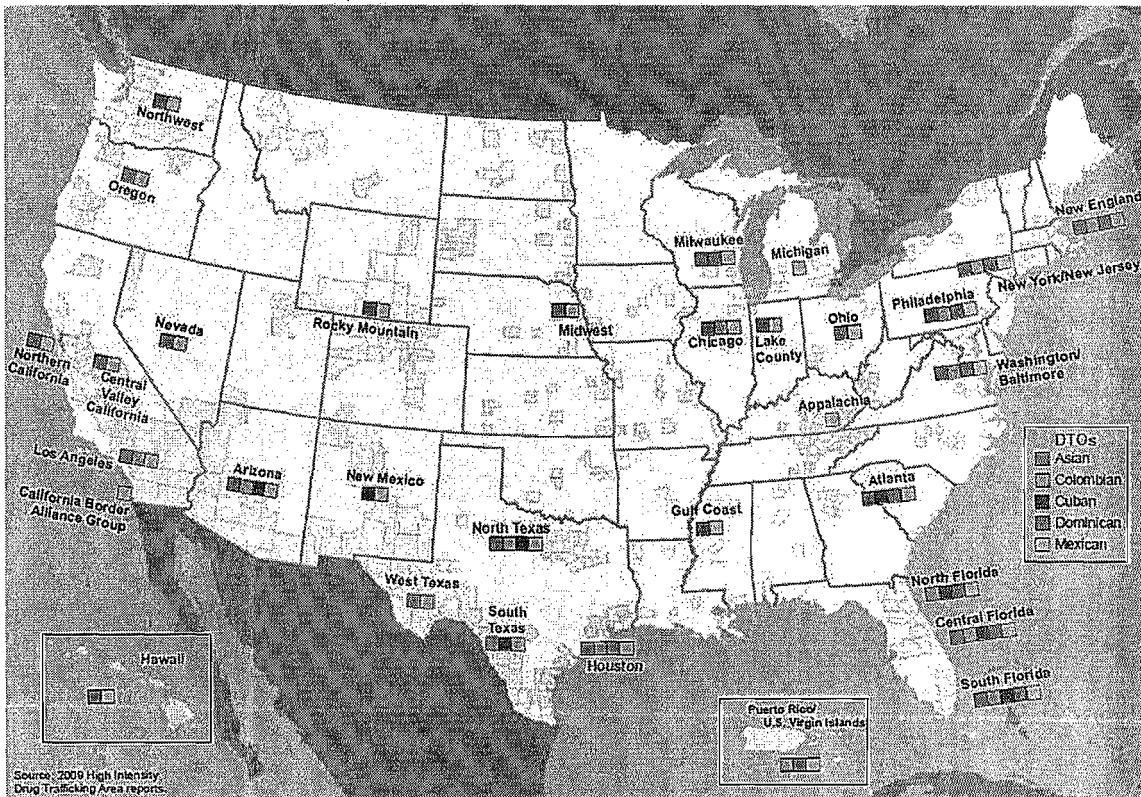
A 2009 report by the U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFC) compared Mexico to Pakistan, calling it a possible failed state.²⁸ Critics assert Mexico is not a “failing state” because there are “no foreign troops on Mexican soil” and “no martial law” in place.²⁹ However, the USJFC report claims Mexico does:

[Mexico and Pakistan] bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse...The Mexican possibility may seem less likely [than Pakistan], but the government, its politicians, and judicial infrastructure are all under strained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state. Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone.³⁰

Although the situation might resemble an internal crime problem for Mexico, it is not. The security of the United States is at threat within Mexico and the crime and violence spills into the U.S. too. (See Figure 1) As recently as 2005, Southern California gangs were required to pay a “tax” to the Mexican Mafia as they expanded their market.³¹ Also in 2005, the U.S. consulate in Nuevo Laredo closed for 10 days “due to safety concerns” posed by local violence.³² During October 2008, the U.S. consulate in Monterrey Mexico was subject

to a grenade attack by a drug cartel member.³³ In March 2009, a Texas teen pled guilty to murder after working for several years as an assassin for the Mexican “Zetas”; he was recruited by the organization at the age of 13.³⁴ Lastly, on March 2010, in separate attacks within 30 minutes of each other, two employees of the U.S. consulate in Juarez, Chihuahua and a Mexican citizen were murdered. Despite both U.S. and Mexico government reluctance to admit it, the details of the incidents suggest Americans were deliberate targets of the violence.³⁵

Figure 1. Mexican Drug Cartel Presence in the U.S.



Source: National Drug Intelligence Center's National Drug Threat Survey 2009.

Manwaring framed the problem accurately by stating, “The internal security of Mexico is

well beyond a simple law enforcement problem, it is a socio-political problem, and a national security issue with implications beyond Mexico's borders."³⁶ The cartels have such an influence on the Mexican government; they meet Steven Metz' definition of a commercialist insurgent group.³⁷ The defining feature is the expansion of the criminal activity into a security threat, especially in the hinterlands where the government control is limited.³⁸ Furthermore, Bard O'Neil asserts the goals of a commercialist insurgent are "nothing more than the acquisition of material resources through seizure and control of political power...no social or religious agenda...[exist] just to amass wealth."³⁹

Additionally, the current conditions in Mexico are ideal for Al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations to move in and gain a foothold. Hutchinson argues, "We know that terrorists in our hemisphere are increasingly engaged in narcotics and weapons smuggling, and money laundering, as a means to fund their criminal agendas."⁴⁰ Mexicans are not the only group crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. In 2004, the U.S. Border Patrol arrested over 65,000 individuals on the southwest border who originated from "Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East."⁴¹

U.S.- Mexico Relations

"Poor Mexico; so far from God, so close to the United States."⁴²
Former Gen and President of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz

The U.S. - Mexico relationship has not always been so hospitable. In 1997, Mexican authorities would not allow U.S. Navy ships to refuel in their ports without 30 days notice.⁴³ In addition, agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) could not carry weapons when operating within Mexican borders.⁴⁴ More disturbing is the 1997 testimony of DEA

Administrator Thomas Constantine who stated, "There is not one single law enforcement institution in Mexico with whom the DEA has an entirely trusting relationship."⁴⁵

Constantine's stance might have had something to do with the death of an undercover DEA agent, Enrique "Kiki" Camarena Salazar in 1985. "We know why Kiki was taken from us – because the Mexican Government was working in complicity with the godfathers of the drug trade..."⁴⁶ George Grayson asserts this agent's execution and lack of response from the Mexican authorities has "reverberated throughout Washington and poisoned U.S. - Mexico relations for years."⁴⁷

Over the past 13 years, not much has changed according to DEA Special Agent Ray Fragoso. Fragoso occasionally works in the area surrounding the southwest U.S.-Mexico border. Fragoso claims the relationships with sister agencies in Mexico have stayed about the same. Rampant corruption within Mexican law enforcement institutions still causes friction. Asked specifically what type of military assistance would help the Mexican cause, he acknowledged the support of conventional forces, but claims, "U.S. SOF forces have not been tainted with corruption and bring better, more state of the art equipment to the fight."⁴⁸

Mexico's Internal Reform

President Calderon is reforming the system and numerous efforts are in place to clean up the multiple police departments at all levels of government.⁴⁹ During his first year in office, President Calderon "initiated ballistics tests" on police weapons in Tijuana to identify any used to support drug cartels.⁵⁰ In 2007, he dismissed 284 federal police commanders who failed "drug and polygraph tests."⁵¹ On 12 January 2010, the Mexican government replaced

police chiefs of five cities with retired military officials in order to battle the suspected corruption at the local levels of law enforcement.⁵² Reform is taking place within the judicial side as well. Within weeks of taking office, Calderon delivered 15 drug crime related suspects to the U.S., three of which were on the U.S. “Kingpin list.”⁵³ He has supported the “Clean up Mexico” campaign, which is similar to a neighborhood watch program to rally local support against crime.⁵⁴ He has reached out to the military to show support where past officials openly belittled the military. During an interview on Larry King Live after the 9/11 tragedy, Former President Vicente Fox stated, “Militarily speaking, we don’t count. I mean, we are not a military country. We don’t have a strong Army.”⁵⁵ One could argue the former President’s statement is accurate, but voicing this opinion on television disappointed Mexico’s Defense Ministry.⁵⁶ Furthermore, President Calderon has increased military pay in an effort to build the military branch. Calderon also authorized military operations in various districts without notifying the local mayors, in an effort to defeat any forewarning of the operation.⁵⁷

Mexico receives external support as well. President Calderon expressed dissatisfaction in the U.S. support of anti-drug activities in Mexico by only providing “\$40 million to Mexico compared to \$600 million to Columbia in 2006.”⁵⁸ President Obama acknowledged the value of the US-Mexico relationship and visited the country within four months of taking office. One of the topics discussed was the Merida Initiative. The 2008 Merida Initiative provided \$1.6 billion over FY2008 – FY2010 to Mexico and Central America in order to fight drug trafficking, gangs and organized crime. See Table 1 below for Merida assistance amounts:

Table 1. Mérida Funding Request by Program Components
(\$ in millions)

Type of Funding	FY2008 Supplemental Request (Mexico)	FY2008 Supplemental Request (Central America)	FY2009 Request (Mexico)	FY2009 Request (Central America)
Counternarcotics, Counterterrorism, and Border Security	306.3	16.6	238.3	40.0
Public Security and Law Enforcement	56.1	25.7	158.5	32.0
Institution Building and Rule of Law	100.6	7.7	30.7	23.0
Program Support	37.0	—	22.5	5.0
Total	500.0	50.0	450.0	100.0

Sources: U.S. Department of State briefing paper provided to Congressional offices; U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY 2009.

Of the FY2008 requested funds, congress approved \$400 million to Mexico. Of that, \$208 was million allocated for eight military transport helicopters and two surveillance planes.⁵⁹ Around \$36 million supplied Mexican law enforcement agencies with gear such as bulletproof vests and armored vehicles. Lastly, \$15 million was used to promote professionalism, anti-gang, anti-organized crime, anti-corruption within the justice system.⁶⁰

Department of Defense Assistance Other Than SOF

Mobilizing large numbers of conventional forces and deploying to Mexico is not the answer. Currently the U.S. DoD is deeply involved in withdrawing troops from Iraq and reinforcing its efforts in Afghanistan. Asking the DoD to move into a “third round” of insurgent warfare does not seem likely. In addition, deploying large numbers of U.S. troops to operate within Mexican borders would not be acceptable to the country of Mexico. Former Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina-Mora stated, “I don’t see the U.S.

military playing an active role in this...certainly Mexico has enough institutional capabilities with this.”⁶¹ The evidence points to the contrary.

Some have suggested using the National Guard to help federal and local law enforcement reinforce the U.S.-Mexico border.⁶² In 2006, President Bush approved “Operation Jump Start” and placed 6000 National Guard troops on the border. According to Border Patrol Chief David Aguilar, this operation provided worthy results as apprehensions of those crossing the border illegally dropped 45% in a three-month period.⁶³ Despite being a valid solution to staffing issues on the actual border, it does little in helping the Mexican authorities consolidate and strengthen its security institutions. However, even if U.S. actions are limited to the northern side of the border, Mexican authorities still benefit from successes of our Homeland Security mission.

Special Operations Forces and Mexico

Some analysts argue any type of military presence results in the larger militarization of the situation. Timothy Dunn argues, “while theoretically designed to be used selectively, these measures often led to widespread repression and human rights abuses, including, in a disturbing number of cases, “death squads” the ultimate means of securing social control in El Salvador, Vietnam and Guatemala.”⁶⁴ Dunn argues there has been a great build up and militarization along the border in a silent way. Despite suggesting the border militarization starting in 1978, Dunn provides no documented cases of military atrocities on the border.

Another issue many critics still recall is the School of the Americas (SOA). The school provided training to military members of Latin American countries. After originating in

Panama in 1963, it moved to Fort Benning, GA in 1984 as Panama prepared to assume control of the canal.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, several of the students that graduated from the school later turned against their rightful head of state and organized rebellions or coups. This brought considerable attention to the program. People questioned what the Americans were teaching at the SOA. Lesley Gill asserts the U.S. government used the school to utilize Latin American security forces as “extensions of its own power in Latin America and internationalized state sponsored violence.”⁶⁶ The school received criticism because questionable methods of interrogation and outright execution techniques were allegedly part of the curriculum.⁶⁷

The school disbanded in 2000 then reopened in 2001. The school is still located at Fort Benning and known as The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Despite the new name and modern curriculum, the history of the school is still a sensitive subject. While fielding questions about Honduras in 2009, the Department of State Western Hemisphere Director Arturo Valenzuela was asked about the School of Americas.⁶⁸

The SOA story continues as far as modern day Mexico is concerned too. The elite Mexican Special Forces, Grupo Aeromovil de Especiales (GAFE), have members who attended the SOA. Unfortunately, some of these highly trained individuals gave into corruption and formed their own criminal enterprise, the Zetas.⁶⁹ The Zetas, along with several other private entities, have taken over areas where the Mexican government has no influence. The Mexican government refers to these “semiautonomous enclaves” as “Zones of Impunity.”⁷⁰ There are over 233 “zones of Impunity” within the borders of Mexico.⁷¹ The drug industry these organizations protect produces an estimated \$25 billion per year.⁷² The

Zetas are still active as they were planning attacks on 31 December 2009 and making threats of violence over the New Year's period in the Juarez Mexico area.⁷³

U.S. Special Operations Forces in Mexico

“Requesting assistance from the U.S. is a sensitive issue in Mexico, a country that traditionally has been wary of U.S. intervention.”⁷⁴ Colleen Cook

SOF is the best U.S. military unit to conduct Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Security Assistance (SA), and Security Force Assistance (SFA). John Collins describes some examples of SOF assistance:

Not all counterdrug duty is hazardous. Reserve officers associated with SOF professional development heighten awareness among senior officers and civilian officials while PSYOP [Psychological Operations] military information support teams conduct classes for schoolchildren. A squadron of Air Force Special Operations Command that is focused on FID teaches host nation air crews to maintain fixed wing aircraft and helicopters, without which they could only cover a small fraction of the territory where drug producers and smugglers operate.⁷⁵

SOF units are the best solution for this mission for several reasons. First, the footprint of a Special Operations unit is much smaller than that of a regular sized conventional unit. Collins asserts, “small, self-reliant SOF units function effectively in austere circumstances without an extensive infrastructure.”⁷⁶ The assistance and mere presence of a SOF unit can be overt, yet still discrete. A small advisory unit will be much more acceptable to Mexican authorities, and both the Mexican and U.S. populace. Moreover, Collins relates, “Unique training and skills enable them to operate where conventional units cannot be used for political or military reasons.”⁷⁷

Secondly, SOF units are subject matter experts and able to provide excellent training within several key areas of interest for Mexico. In deciding what SOF support the host nation requires, the U.S. Ambassador to the country can provide valuable insight. In his 1996 article, former Deputy Chief of Mission to El Salvador Ambassador David Passage mentions several skill sets SOF operators would excel in: Training Police Forces, Border Protection/Anti smuggling, Aviation, Civil Affairs, and Counternarcotics.⁷⁸

Sometimes working with Foreign Service Officers (FSO) within the host nation can be difficult. This individual might have no prior military experience at all. Jon Gundersen points out, “some Foreign Service officers still perceive the military as latter day Rambos, or as short-term interlopers who have little understanding of local conditions or of long term American interests.”⁷⁹ It is paramount for the SOF to engage the FSO and build strong relationships to prevent either of these pre-conceived notions.

A survey conducted in 1998 questioned 65 American Ambassadors. The ambassadors commented on the quality of support their embassies received from SOF forces in the country. Examining the results of the survey revealed a, “special emphasis was placed upon SOF’s regionally oriented cultural sensitivities, flexibility, low-profile presence and exceptional professionalism.”⁸⁰ The survey revealed no specific drawbacks to using SOF; however, there was a desire for more training exercises and room for improvement in coordination and communication by all parties involved.⁸¹

Special Operations Forces have additional skills to offer Mexico. First, techniques designed to combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), such as searching for tunnels and underground storage facilities, are helpful to the Mexican military.⁸² Admittedly, the

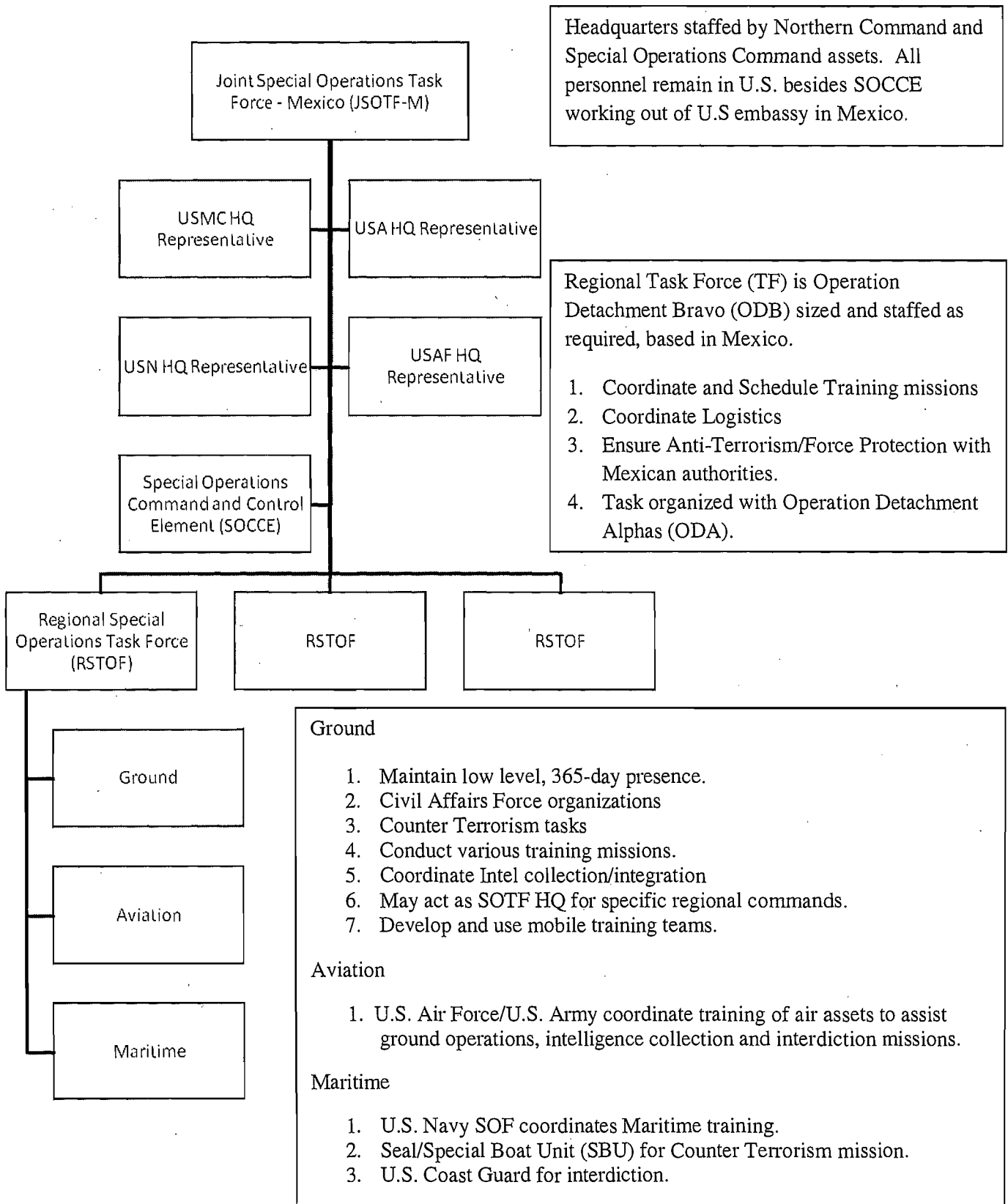
threat of WMDs is low, but this capability can discover tunnels used to bypass border security checkpoints by drug traffickers and other criminals. During July 2008, the Mexican Navy captured a self-propelled semi-submersible vessel. The vessel contained 5.8 metric tons of cocaine and has become a popular means of transporting drugs from Columbia to Mexico.⁸³ As these submersible become more advanced and harder to detect, U.S. Navy Special Warfare assistance is valuable. U.S. submarines could also provide assistance, but the Mexican Navy is not equipped with submarines, hence using specialized SOF units to train the Mexican Navy allows them to operate with organic assets.

In addition, the 2007 Security Force Assistance Planners Guide identifies several post conflict essential tasks valuable to Mexico. Of note are operations in Security Coordination, Transparency and Anti-Corruption, Social protection, Indigenous Police, Community Rebuilding, and Human rights.⁸⁴ Collins also points out, “Army SOF Psychological Ops and Civil affairs specialist are regionally oriented.”⁸⁵ With this in mind, these specialized SOF units are comfortable and ‘acclimatized’ to the Information Operations (IO) terrain within Mexico. Using these mentioned capabilities, a small team of SOF personnel can train and advise the Mexican Army, Navy, government officials and law enforcement agencies in order to legitimize the government and its officials.

How to Implement SOF in Mexico.

Depicted in Table 2 is a suggested force structure of Joint Special Operations Task Force – Mexico. This basic framework is a starting point and can be modified as the mission and/or political situation demanded.

Table 2 – Suggested structure of Joint Special Operations Task Force - Mexico



When implementing SOF within Mexico, working through a plan created with the help of the Ambassador and country team would be the first step. The biggest restraint to U.S. assistance is Mexico's constitution. The Mexican constitution prohibits the presence of foreign troops on their national territory without approval from the Mexican Senate.⁸⁶ In addition, those troops need special permission to carry weapons. Lastly, SOF personnel will not be permitted to participate in direct action operations; their presence is to train and advise only.

Cooperation from and approval of Mexican politicians to SOF use in Mexico is not an impossible task. When negotiating the aforementioned Merida plan, nothing similar existed between Mexico and the U.S. "in part because of distrust between the countries."⁸⁷ However, this would not be the first alliance with the U.S. and Mexican governments regarding security matters. The two nations cooperated during World War II and during the U.S. conflict with the Philippines. "When the Mexican government perceives a threat to its security, it is capable of forming an alliance."⁸⁸ The lack of legitimate law enforcement agencies and an overwhelmed military force is a security threat to Mexico and outweighs the past reluctance for the military of both countries to operate jointly.

An extremely important factor to consider is the U.S. need to obtain the approval of the Mexican populace. Senator Dodd summed it up nicely; "I think it is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of the people of Mexico, not unlike our own people, are horrified by what is happening... In fact, the people of Mexico may be one of our strongest allies in this whole process."⁸⁹ Manwaring points out, "[Mexico] has a vibrant middle class that supports

law and order.”⁹⁰ SOF Civil Affairs projects along with well-coordinated Information Operations will build legitimacy with the populace.

To further satisfy the Mexican populace and/or if the current political environment in Mexico does not sustain immediate SOF support, the U.S. should initiate the support by creating small, SOF training exercises. These exercises would demonstrate the willingness of the U.S. to cooperate and strengthen relationships between the two countries. The exercises should focus primarily on U.S. and Mexican SOF, but could eventually become more involved. The multinational SOF exercise “Jackel Stone” held in Croatia during 2009 is an excellent exercise to replicate with Mexico.⁹¹ Ten countries and nearly 1500 special operations forces personnel participated in the 17-day event. The exercise “improved the ability of the participants to conduct counterinsurgency operations through a demanding and realistic exercise scenario.”⁹² Another example is the “Southern Star” exercise held in Chile. This U.S. Southern Command sponsored exercise originally allowed U.S. and Chilean forces training opportunities. In 2009, five countries participated in the event. Of note, military members of all five countries conduct the exercise almost exclusively in Spanish.⁹³ Brigadier General Hector Pagan, Special Operations Command South commander, related the exercise “has been a good vehicle for getting these countries together.”⁹⁴ The template is ideal to facilitate a joint multinational exercise in Mexico.

Today one of the primary facets of the U.S. Department of State goals for developing security in Mexico is counter narcotics. SOF can facilitate success within the Mexican military ranks and assist their efforts repairing the suspect police forces. After revamping the federal security institutions, the Mexican government can concentrate on the counter narcotic

mission. Ideally, more interagency actors can participate in the support. For example, the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador's mission is to provide "criminal justice institution building and strengthen the partnerships of law enforcement agencies."⁹⁵ Sponsoring the academy is the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. This would be an excellent follow on tool after SOF support.

While discussing U.S. SOF and Mexican force integration, a Mexican point of view is necessary. Daniel Alvarez is a Commander in the Mexican Navy. Alvarez graduated from The Basic School, Infantry Officers Course and is currently a student at the Marine Command and Staff College, Quantico, VA. Alvarez related inaction on the part of past presidential administrations allowed the cartels to become as powerful as they are today. While the government did nothing, the cartels were "conquering parts of the marginalized population, investing in construction of schools and small hospitals, and creating jobs through the establishment of businesses for money laundering."⁹⁶ Alvarez believes SOF assistance would be a good great way for the U.S military to assist Mexico in their internal security dilemma. Also important is improving information exchange between the two countries. Furthermore, the U.S. needs to share the lessons learned from battling cartels in Columbia that Mexico authorities might want to implement. In addition, Alvarez believes "anti-drug" and "anti-insurgency" exercises ranging "from small units up to battalion level, with the employment of air, land and sea forces" would be beneficial as well.⁹⁷

In Alvarez's opinion, Mexico is ready for U.S. military assistance so it can become a "good image to the world as soon as possible."⁹⁸ One of the possible obstacles would be

convincing the Mexican populace and government to allow U.S. forces on Mexican soil.

Alvarez does not see this as a problem and believes the senate would approve U.S. SOF in an advisory role for a specific period. Furthermore, he believes Mexican citizens “want a different Mexico, drug free and [with] safe spaces for families.”⁹⁹ To maintain this public support, Alvarez stressed the importance of publicizing, “every achievement obtained” from any possible combined U.S. - Mexican effort to offset “counter-propaganda” disseminated by the cartels or minority politicians.¹⁰⁰

U.S. military experience in El Salvador, Columbia, the Philippines, Iraq and Afghanistan would be of great value to the Mexican military. The ‘Columbia plan’ Alvarez referred to was executed by the U.S. Southern Command and is an excellent template for counterdrug/security building in Mexico. In Columbia SOF personnel were used to “teach intelligence collection, scouting, patrolling, infantry tactics, and counterterrorism.”¹⁰¹ The SOF role in Columbia was that of advisors and the U.S. units were, “forbidden to participate in counterinsurgency operations.”¹⁰² While utilizing SOF units in Mexico, the same restriction would more than likely be in place. Another outstanding example of the use of SOF in an advisory role took place in El Salvador in 1981. The U.S. congress approved the use of 55 soldiers to train and advise the El Salvadorian army. In 5 years, that army grew from 20,000 to 56,000 troops. A training facility created in El Salvador ensured the police became a better force and cut down on human rights violations. Members of the U.S. Special Forces completed the assistance in 1992.¹⁰³

Conclusion

“I think we are beginning to be in a position to help the Mexicans more than we have in the past. Some of the old biases against cooperation...between our militaries...are being set aside.”¹⁰⁴ Defense Secretary Robert Gates, 1 March 2009

The criminal activity is severe, but the ramifications of the Mexican government collapsing are extremely detrimental to our national security and warrant the attention of the U.S. military. In 2003 during the War on Terrorism, the DEA connected drug relations with terrorists in Europe to those in Mexico.¹⁰⁵ This connection can become a dangerous situation very rapidly. Mexican initiatives are causing “the splintering of and competition among drug trafficking organizations” which has been absent in past years.¹⁰⁶ March 2010 has seen two major Mexican mafias, the Gulf Cartel and their former private army, the Zetas, engaged in a violent territorial battle.¹⁰⁷ During this clash, schools let students go home early, churches cancel Mass, and businesses close their doors to escape the fighting.¹⁰⁸ With this in mind, now is the time to assist President Calderon and provide Mexican officials SOF support.

Using SOF is not the only cure for the Mexican security dilemma. Manwaring framed the problem accurately by stating, “The internal security of Mexico is well beyond a simple law enforcement problem, it is a socio-political problem, and a national security issue with implications beyond Mexico’s borders.”¹⁰⁹ Our interagency partners have done a great deal for the institutions of Mexico and continue to do so. The DoD needs to build upon this success and help further progress.

President Calderon referred to drug violence as a “threat to the Mexican State” and mobilized 24,000 members of the military and federal police to combat it.¹¹⁰ In addition,

Craig Deare elaborates four issues with Mexico's military "doing all the work" regarding the cartels. Problems include increased human rights abuse, increased possibility of corruption, associated risks of greater military involvement in nonmilitary affairs, and no reserve.¹¹¹

These issues could destroy the only legitimate security institution left in Mexico: their military. U.S. SOF is the ideal candidate to assist Mexico in this fight. Furthermore, with the given push for interagency collaboration, no other U.S. forces have such "unparalleled interagency and international expertise" at their disposal than SOF.¹¹²

The political situation changes rapidly. On 24 March 2010 several U.S. officials, to include Secretaries of State, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Homeland Security personnel traveled to Mexico to discuss U.S. counter narcotic assistance to Mexico.

Questioned as to the outcome of the meetings and possible military support to Mexico, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano replied:

Yes. Let me be very, very clear (because) this is a very delicate subject...Our military in certain limited ways has been working with the Mexican military in their efforts against the drug cartels. But, it is at the request of the Mexican government, in consultation with the Mexican government. And it is only one part of our overall efforts with Mexico, which are primarily civilian in nature.¹¹³

It is important U.S. assistance focus on strengthening Mexico's internal security institutions vice concentrating on counter drug operations. Without the proper functions of government, the cartels will survive. Special Operations Forces FID mission "commonly takes years to achieve [success]."¹¹⁴ It is time for the U.S. to act.

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