

Trouble on the borders: Latin America's new conflict zones

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The border regions of Latin America are home to the region's most extreme violence and instability. Mexico's attempts to combat drug trafficking on its frontier with the United States and the dispute between Ecuador and Colombia over the latter's bombardment of a FARC camp epitomize the dilemmas of tackling illicit trafficking and the presence of armed groups along frontiers that lie largely outside the control of the state. The new hemispheric security strategy of the United States promises an integrated and cooperative approach to these concerns and other "emerging threats". But military solutions in contexts marked by institutional corrosion, powerful illicit networks and competing authorities have rarely proved effective over the long term, while the concentration of security threats along international frontiers is stirring distrust between neighbouring countries rather than increasing cooperation.

Introduction

The panorama of conflict and violence in present day Latin America is one of stark contradictions. Whereas armed aggression between states appeared to have become extinct - until the warmongering gestures of early March 2008 between Venezuela and Colombia - low-intensity violence has taken root in cities, homicide rates are amongst the world's highest, and political polarization lends itself to mass street-level protests and muscular shows of strength.

But it is in Latin America's borderlands that this contrast between general inter-state stability and intensifying civil and criminal strife is most prominent. Aside from the aftermath of Colombia's armed incursion into Ecuador, violence and institutional corrosion have plagued as never before the frontier between Mexico and the United States, while Guatemala's eastern border region and Colombia's frontiers with Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil witness these countries' highest murder rates, as well as territorial capture by armed groups and narco-trafficking networks. Latin America's most established frontier town, Ciudad del Este - on the Paraguayan side of the tri-partite border with Argentina and Brazil - has long been a haven for money laundering and a thriving smuggling industry, as well as being linked by intelligence services to Islamist terrorism and the two deadly attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires in the 1990s.

One of the principal ironies of this border malaise is the almost total absence of official disputes over how national territories should be demarcated, thereby appearing to free these areas of the sort of state-sponsored hostilities witnessed in the contested frontiers of Kashmir, Sudan or Kosovo. Those borders which remain in dispute are few in number: the Amazonian frontier dispute between Peru and Ecuador was seemingly resolved in 1999, while Chile and Argentina

settled all their territorial differences in the 1990s, barring that over 50 kilometres of glacial ice in Southern Patagonia. Only Nicaragua retains live and vociferous demands over territory in the Gulf of Fonseca, and over Colombia's San Andrés island, both of which are fanned by the Central American nation's leaders for their symbolic political value.¹

Globalization and regional integration, furthermore, have reduced the pay-offs for smuggling networks. In cases such as the Mexican border, moreover, the state's presence has steadily risen, to the extent that towns such as Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana are patrolled by municipal and federal police forces, in addition to thousands of masked soldiers deployed since December 2006 to combat drug cartels. And yet it is in these borderlands that the "complex threats and risks" identified by the defence ministers of the Americas in their 2004 Quito declaration, namely "terrorism, drug trafficking, the illicit trafficking of arms, and transnational crime", are clustered, and continue to intensify.² Furthermore, these and other border regions are establishing new structures of authority, in which traditional citizenship rights - as guaranteed by a central state - have become hollow promises, to be replaced at best by the protection and welfare offered by shadow states, mafia or other de facto powers.

This paper seeks to identify the broad, cross-national trends that underlie this concentration of insecurity, instability and new models of governance in national frontiers, using the case of Latin America to identify trends that are also relevant to other porous and stateless frontier lands, particularly the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. It will also assess the suitability and feasibility of the new mechanisms that have been promoted, particularly by the United States, as responses to perceived threats arising from these areas.

Turbulence on the frontier: a brief overview

Each of the region's crisis frontiers has its own particularities and dynamics, deriving from their widely divergent economic status, levels of state presence or control by armed groups, and linkages to the country's power centres. Yet these distinct initial conditions - from the prosperity of Ciudad del Este to the extreme poverty of the Putumayo river bordering Colombia and Ecuador - have not impeded the emergence of the common characteristics of violence, human displacement, criminal presence, and the corruption of state institutions.

Mexico's border with the United States stands out for the progressive militarization of security policy under President Felipe Calderón, the extreme brutality and internecine warfare of the drug cartels - over 1,300 were killed in drug-related violence from January to the end of May 2008³ - and for the US commitment to fund the modernization and re-equipment of Mexico's military, police and judicial forces in an effort to staunch the northern flow of cocaine⁴ and its criminal channels. This aid plan, launched by President Bush in October 2007 as the Mérida Initiative, initially envisaged a 1.4 billion dollar contribution to the Mexican and Central American security sector over three years, although the process of congressional approval, which terminated on June 26, reduced the initial investment by 85 million dollars.

Wide cross-party support in Washington for the initiative, which follows an extended period of mutual suspicion between the two countries' security authorities, should nevertheless not obscure the fundamental difficulties that will be faced in tackling a highly consolidated criminal

¹ It should be added that the Falklands/Malvinas dispute between Argentina and Britain can arguably be viewed as a question of frontiers, especially in light of Argentine claims that the islands form part of that country's continental shelf. Meanwhile, a maritime frontier dispute between Suriname and Guyana was settled by UN arbitration in 2007.

² Sixth Conference of Ministers of Defense of the Americas (2004), "Declaration of Quito", p. 3.

³ "Body count mounts as the drug cartels battle each other - and the police," *The Guardian* 27/05/2008.

⁴ An estimated 90 percent of the cocaine consumed in the United States in 2006 passed through Mexico. International Crisis Group (2008), *Latin American Drugs I: Losing the Fight*, p. 23.

enterprise. Narco-trafficking has established a major presence in local police forces - epitomized by the arrest of all of Nuevo Laredo's 730-member local police in June 2005 - as well as in the federal police, 284 of whose senior officers were fired by Calderón last year. The record of the armed forces in combating the drug trade is also tainted by the manner in which hundreds of soldiers specially trained by the Pentagon to fight drugs cartels in the late 1990s - the so-called GAFE officer corps - were later found to have accepted bribes, engaged in torture, or worse, to have formed the much feared hit-squad of the Gulf Cartel, the Zetas.⁵ Meanwhile, local communities are reported to have tolerated and sheltered the presence of armed criminal networks, and even adapted to the opportunities for illicit enrichment by providing occasional services, such as transport, finance, or logistical support.⁶ In turn, the cartels have diversified into providing other services, particularly human and arms trafficking across the US border, and money laundering.

This trend towards corrosion of local police and political institutions, accompanied by a sharp deterioration in the security conditions of local citizens, can also be detected in the border areas of Guatemala, across which much of the cocaine sourced in Colombia arrives into Mexico. A recent map of violence in the country, prepared by the United Nations Development Programme, showed both the concentration of high murder rates on the north-eastern, Atlantic and southern borders, as well as inverse correlations between violence and poverty; in other words, the country's poor indigenous highlands were also its least violent regions. The municipality with the highest murder rate - an astonishing 202 per 100,000 habitants - was San Benito, in the semi-tropical, sparsely populated province of Petén, bordering Belize and Mexico.⁷

Along with other states along Guatemala's eastern border and seaboard, Petén is a favoured route for the movement of cocaine and migrants,⁸ and has even been linked with a child-smuggling racket that has allegedly been given at least tacit support by local authorities.⁹ The region's poor communications and peripheral status in the country, characteristics it shares with other Atlantic regions in Central America (particularly Honduras and Nicaragua), make it easier for organized crime to corrupt unsupervised and isolated local police forces. Land grabs by armed criminal gangs and drug traffickers have become rife: there are currently 565 land disputes in the country's north-east according to a recent report from the country's Human Rights Ombudsman, many of them derived from seizures by drug rings.¹⁰ Recent debates in the Guatemala parliament have stressed the need to compensate for regular purges of the police force in Petén with a greatly expanded military presence, although human rights groups have voiced serious reservations over the merits of extending the involvement of the country's armed forces in domestic policing.

The borders which have earned the reputation as Latin America's most lawless and ungoverned, however, are those of Colombia. Territorial control by paramilitaries or the FARC and ELN rebel militia, mostly along the frontiers with Venezuela and Ecuador, have permitted a relatively stable cultivation of coca, despite concerted efforts to fumigate crops and disarm or defeat these groups. Indeed, one of the main effects of aerial spraying under the US-funded Plan Colombia has been to shift crop cultivation to remoter parts of Ecuadorean border, the Amazon region, and the country's north-eastern border with Venezuela.¹¹ The sustained counter-

⁵ Freeman, L. (2008), "La política antidrogas en la relación México-Estados Unidos", *Foreign Affairs en Español* vol 8: 1, pp 16-17.

⁶ "The diffusion of the drug business into the fiber of local and global economic life is much harder to fathom, let alone combat." Naím, M. (2005), *Illicit*, New York: Anchor, p. 67.

⁷ PNUD (2007), *Informe estadístico de la violencia en Guatemala*, Guatemala, p. 27.

⁸ The principal route for illegal migration to Mexico, however, is across the Suchiate river to the town of Tapachula, on Mexico's south-western frontier. Most of the migrants taking this route are from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Colombia, although Somalians, Ethiopians and Sudanese have also been picked up. UNHCR-ACNUR (2006), *Refview*, no. 4, pp 16-17.

⁹ "Alarma a Iglesia Católica ingobernabilidad en Petén." *Prensa Libre*, 31/07/2007

¹⁰ Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala, *Informe Semanal*, 28/03/2008 to 03/04/2008.

¹¹ See the figures on crop cultivation and mobility in Washington Office on Latin America (2008), "Chemical Reactions. Fumigation: Spreading Coca and Threatening Colombia's Ecological and Cultural Diversity", Washington DC, p. 22.

insurgency offensive under President Álvaro Uribe has similarly tended to force production towards the most inaccessible parts of arable land along or across Colombia's borders - places where alternative, licit crops have little economic viability due to the huge costs of transport, and where the armed groups can take advantage of travel over porous borders to smuggle out drugs (to the Pacific coast via Ecuador and Peru, for instance), launder their proceeds, or secure a safe haven.¹²

This dynamic process formed the background to the diplomatic crisis between Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela in March. The diplomatic hostilities and alleged Venezuelan army mobilization that followed Colombia's bombardment of a FARC camp in Ecuadoran territory close to the Putumayo river on March 1 must partly be interpreted as the first military manifestation of the inter-state, ideologically-tinted cleavage that has opened up in Latin America following the formation of the Bolivarian Alliance and the consolidation of Colombia's status as a leading US ally.

Yet this reading of the crisis, which was reinforced by the manifest divisions in the Organization of American States (OAS) debate on the incursion on March 17,¹³ should not obscure an underlying narrative of diminishing state control over ever more remote border economies, accompanied by the expanding influence of armed groups and criminal networks. The resulting mass displacements of rural inhabitants (an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Colombians have been forced into Ecuador, while over half a million officially resided in Venezuela in 2005¹⁴), as well as the evident difficulties on all sides of policing this 700-kilometre border, have diluted any claims to real and effective sovereignty. For Colombia's government, these territories are thus subject to the logic of a transnational security strategy grounded in counter-terrorism and the war on drugs; for Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, on the other hand, Colombia's counter-insurgent strategy has led to the displacement of what are essentially domestic sources of instability, turned Ecuador's three border provinces into the most violent in the country, and made his own compatriots "victims of the Colombian conflict"¹⁵ and of Uribe's "lack of respect" for neighbouring countries.

Beyond Colombia's borders, Brazil's Amazon frontiers are likewise notorious for their sparse population and limited state presence. A particularly vivid example is provided by the former Dutch colony of Suriname, where drugs are transported from Brazil (the destination of around 15 percent of Colombian cocaine), and on to West Africa or Europe. This frontier region is virtually unpatrolled, and Suriname's security forces and political authorities - including former military leader Desi Bouterse¹⁶ - are tainted by allegations of involvement in trafficking networks; in response, Dutch airport authorities conduct full searches of every Surinamese citizen entering Holland, arresting 600 of them on drugs charges in 2007. In the Caribbean, meanwhile, Haiti's 360-kilometre border with the Dominican Republic has also been identified as a poorly policed sieve, through which traffickers run drugs, arms, cash, emigrants and child labourers with the tacit approval of Dominican authorities and businesses.¹⁷ The creation last year of a new border guard force, Cesfront, has entailed mass deportations - 10,000 from September to November 2007 - albeit in an arbitrary and summary fashion.

Lastly, Latin America's most celebrated entrepôt for money laundering, gun running and smuggling of genuine and fake goods remains Ciudad del Este, on the Paraguayan side of the tripartite

¹² See ICG, *op. cit.*, pp 6-10; Reyes, A., Thoumi, F. E. & Duica, L. (2006), "El Narcotráfico en las Relaciones Fronterizas de Colombia," Centro de Estudios y Observatorio de Drogas y Delito Universidad de Rosario: Bogotá, p. 10.

¹³ See the resolution at http://scm.oas.org/doc_public/ENGLISH/HIST_08/RC00107E06.DOC, and particularly the US reservations.

¹⁴ Refview, *op. cit.*, p. 8; "El vallenato en la maleta," BBC Mundo online, 21/07/2006.

¹⁵ Interview with Rafael Correa. Castillo, G., "Mis manos están limpias y sin sangre, algo que Uribe no puede decir," Público 18/04/20'08.

¹⁶ "Cocaine traffickers develop new routes from Brazil," Jane's Intelligence Review 01/01/2006.

¹⁷ Younge, G. (2005), "Haitian children sold as cheap labourers and prostitutes for little more than £50", The Guardian 22/09/2005.

border with Argentina and Brazil. Aside from the movement of goods and drugs - largely carried out by poor Paraguayan runners across the International Friendship Bridge into Brazil - the city has long been suspected by the Argentine and US intelligence services of harbouring in its large Lebanese and Syrian trading community active jihadist cells. According to these claims, the cells planned the attacks in Buenos Aires on the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the AMIA Jewish community centre in 1994, as well as organizing fund-raising for various Islamist causes.¹⁸ The local Arab community has repeatedly rejected the accusations, but there is no doubt that the city retains an exceptional extra-legal status, in large part thanks to its significant role in the Paraguayan economy and links to that country's political establishment,¹⁹ and thus appears to fit the paradigm of the emerging threat complex, as defined by the 2004 Quito declaration.

The borderland economies: drivers of growth and consolidation

In certain respects, the border areas described above epitomize the inheritance of centralized states governing large territories, over which the centre manages to exert only partial control. They are, in the words of Guillermo O'Donnell, the "brown areas" of Latin America. "The bureaucratic state may be present in the form of buildings and officials paid out of public budgets, but the legal state is absent: whatever formally sanctioned law exists is applied intermittently, if at all."²⁰

Institutional corrosion certainly forms the initial condition out of which frontier economies emerge. Contraband, carried out with tacit official consent, has been a traditional practice in regions such as Colombia's Guajira, Norte de Santander and the Putumayo, Mexico's northern border or Paraguay's Ciudad del Este, to the extent that mass protests have been staged in Guajira to insist on the "right" to smuggle.²¹ These regions have also witnessed constant migratory flows across borders. Yet in Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia and Paraguay it is apparent that the licit and illicit wealth produced in the borderlands have increased sharply in a context marked by the establishment of alternative authority structures, increasing levels of violence and intensifying flows of displaced people. Changing economic conditions (lower import tariffs or varying currency rates) and connections to regional and global trade circuits have definitively shifted these regions into the newer economies of drug trafficking and money laundering, often in league with armed groups exerting control over blocs of territory.

One central component of this process of expansion and consolidation of the borderland political economy is thus the progressive encampment of armed groups, or heavily armed criminal networks, in the frontier territory. Traditions of semi-legal business practice stimulate and are stimulated by hollow state institutions, as O'Donnell describes. But it is the transformation and economic optimization of these smuggling networks through the creation of stateless territories (Colombia) or mafia-dominated municipalities (Guatemala, Mexico), both firmly linked to wider international economic circuits, which generate the contemporary borderland economic systems. In this respect, it is interesting to note the great capacity for diversification of these new criminal corporations as they adjust their trafficking systems to any good that is prohibited from passing the border; the frontiers, in short, are "places of opportunity and exploitation",²² in which goods sourced from any other networked country can be transported with the aid of complicit local businesspeople. It should be noted that Mexico's drug rings now dominate supply in the United States, even though they themselves are intermediaries.²³ Likewise, the source of Ciudad del Este's wealth is its intermediation between Brazil and global (or fake global) suppliers.

¹⁸ Goldberg, J. (2002), "In the Party of God", *The New Yorker* 28/10/2002.

¹⁹ An estimated 50 percent of Paraguay's GDP is reportedly made up of the informal economy, most of which is based in Ciudad del Este. "Glimmer of success in Paraguay's corruption battle," *The Financial Times* 15/08/2006.

²⁰ O'Donnell, G., (2004), "Why the Rule of Law Matters," *Journal of Democracy*, vol 15:4, pp 32-47.

²¹ Reyes et al, op. cit., p. 82.

²² Goodhand, J. (2006), *Aiding Peace? The Role of NGOs in Armed Conflict*, ITDG Publishing: Rugby, p. 61.

²³ ICG, op. cit., p. 24.

The barter nature of the shadow transborder economy can therefore be interpreted as an inherent part of its emergence as an alternative and a mirror to the simultaneous global spread of liberal ideals, including free trade, limited state intervention and good governance: according to political scientist Mark Duffield, “spreading non-formal transnational trade networks originating in the South are the equivalent of the regional economic systems that have consolidated in the North”.²⁴ In this account, the extra-legal circuits of commodities and narcotics afford both survival mechanisms for the excluded as well as new modes of political and economic organization that conform to new global economic freedoms and the withering of the state: these processes can thus be seen as representing a major “social transformation”.²⁵ For many criminologists, on the other hand, it is the capture of globalization by factions within weak or failed states - particularly through the privatization of state assets or misuse of free capital flows - which defines the emergence of a modern global mafia, camped out in border areas or off-shore nodes of international economic exchange.²⁶

Despite these differences of emphasis and associated policy response, there is remarkable agreement on the fact that non-state actors have taken advantage of the roll-back of the state in the developing world since the 1980s to establish novel, extra-legal and sectarian control over trading zones and trafficking channels, creating in the process new forms of non-state authority and new models of citizenship. Armed militia, gangs, warlords, mafia rings and youth fighters are synonymous with this process in different contexts, and although violence is not a necessary result of these non-state mechanisms of authority, the lack of a clear monopoly of legitimate force - identified by some analysts as a new medievalism²⁷ - will tend, in a context of a ready supply of small arms, to generate sporadic surges of infighting. In this respect, the homicide rates of the Caribbean and Central America, the world’s highest, are indicative of a correlation between trafficking density and chronic violence.

A second key issue, of particular relevance to Colombia, is the part played by counter-insurgent or national security strategies in reshaping the territorial distribution of frontier economies, and their cross-border ramifications. Unlike the other cases discussed, Colombia’s borderlands are both sites of production - in the form of subsistence economies based on coca cultivation - and the supply points for trafficking networks, often linked in business consortia with armed groups (the FARC, the ELN and the paramilitary²⁸). The sustained legal and military offensive undertaken by President Uribe has weakened these armed groups substantially, yet has not managed to reduce to any great extent the total area of land devoted to coca crops; as mentioned above, cultivation has moved to more inhospitable and remote regions, in Putumayo, Orinoquía, the Amazon region and Sierra Nevada de Santa María²⁹, with the result that these economies, involving peasant farmers, organized criminals and armed actors, have become ever more difficult to dismantle. According to one major study, “the fact is that in these areas it is only possible to maintain profitable economic activities beyond the subsistence level if they are illegal.”³⁰

Furthermore, as became evident in the crisis caused by Colombia’s military incursion into Ecuador, weak claims to real, “positive” sovereignty over frontier regions have been compensated

²⁴ Duffield, M. (2001), *Global Governance and the New Wars*, Zed Books: London, p. 145.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 140.

²⁶ Gros, J.G. (2003), “Trouble in Paradise. Crime and Collapsed States in the Age of Globalization.” *The British Journal of Criminology* 43:1, pp 63-80.

²⁷ Rapley, J. (2006), “The New Middle Ages,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June.

²⁸ Intelligence sources estimate that 50 percent of Colombia’s coca crops are in land controlled by the FARC (International Crisis Group (2008), “Colombia: Making Military Progress Pay Off”, p. 8), which would translate, on the basis of figures released by the US Narcotics Control Strategy Report for 2006, into just over 75,000 hectares of land.

²⁹ A large part of the estimated 61 percent of new coca crops are concentrated in these border areas according to the United Nations. See WOLA, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁰ Reyes et al, *op cit.*, pp 63-64.

for by military repression, or by attempted leverage over armed groups through dialogue and tactical support in the name of conflict prevention. Colombia's military offensive has displaced elements of the border networks - namely armed factions, crop production and circuits for money laundering - across national frontiers; cross-border crop fumigation and aerial raids have in response sought to pursue the retreating targets.³¹ Following the March 1 attack, mutual accusations between Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela centred on evidence - much of it drawn from computers in the late FARC commander Raúl Reyes' possession - of complicity between the militia and neighbouring governments, reportedly extending to financial support from Chávez³² and logistical aid from his head of military intelligence, Hugo Carvajal³³; the leaders of Ecuador and Venezuela responded with vituperative attacks on Uribe's own alleged ties to the paramilitary forces.³⁴

Liberal globalization and territorial displacement have thus together proved key to the spread and entrenchment of borderland economic networks. Yet the complicity mentioned above between central states and non-state actors in borderlands over which the former have limited real sovereignty points to the enormous significance of relations between the supposedly criminal sub-world and the legitimate official institutions of state and market.

Numerous examples demonstrate that there is no clear-cut distinction between crime and legality in Latin America. Testimonies and research indicate that "criminal" trafficking occurs alongside and within licit trade: legitimate import-export businesses dealing in charcoal, fruit, furniture or shrink-wrapped frozen meat in Brazil have provided space for drug shipments³⁵; drugs and other goods can easily be stashed in the \$900 million daily commerce between Mexico and the United States³⁶ or the booming bi-national trade between Venezuela and Colombia³⁷; and in Ciudad del Este, the distinction between legal goods, illegal goods, extra-legal handling and legitimate trade are constantly blurred by almost all firms. Furthermore, business elites in the rapidly growing frontier economy of Mexico and the United States - where a number of vast transborder urban and industrial developments are being drafted - do not appear immune to deploying the same repressive violence as drug cartels in their efforts to reclaim land, while also enjoying the tacit support of local police.³⁸

The complicity between security forces and trafficking networks is even more notorious. The case of the Gulf cartel's hit-squad the Zetas, forged by veterans of a 1990s Pentagon-run special forces training programme, is not a mere curiosity. Systematically, throughout Latin America, security force members and judicial authorities - many of them instrumental to repressive national security regimes from the Cold War - have tolerated, supported or graduated into criminal activities: notable cases include Guatemala's anti-narcotic police department, DOAN (dissolved in 2002), its special military branch the kaibiles (many of whom joined drug cartels after force numbers were cut in the post-civil war era), and its police forces, now subject to regular purges. In terms of border policing, it is instructive to note that Guatemala's first major mafia network with links to many parts of government, the so-called Grupo Salvavidas (lifesaver group), was born out of corrupt officials in the customs service. Meanwhile, police in Brazil,

³¹ Aside from challenging Colombia's attack before the Organization of American States (resulting in the OAS foreign ministers' "rejection" of the attack of March 17), Ecuador has also taken its long-standing case against Colombian crop fumigation to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

³² See "Los papeles de las FARC acusan a Chávez," *El País* 10/05/2008.

³³ *Revista Semana*, "El Montesinos de Chávez", 02/02/2008.

³⁴ Castillo, G., *op. cit.*

³⁵ "Cocaine traffickers develop new routes from Brazil," *op. cit.*

³⁶ ICG (2008), *Latin American Drugs I*, p. 26.

³⁷ Sales from Colombia to Venezuela (Colombia's second most important trading partner) rose at an annual 31 percent for the first three months of 2008, in spite of a border closure following the Colombian military attack that lasted for five days. "Suben 31% compras de Venezuela a Colombia", *El Universal* 15/04/2008.

³⁸ Paterson, K. (2008), "Border Land Battle Pits Development against Human Rights," *Americas Policy Program Report*, Washington DC: Center for International Policy.

Argentina, Honduras and El Salvador (particularly after the latter's civil war ended) have all been associated with extra-judicial killings and numerous illicit rackets.

Conclusions: hemispheric security and sovereign states

The vulnerability of the military, police and judiciary to corruption and co-option by criminal networks cautions against policies that seek to curb transborder trafficking through reinforced security measures, or handing special powers to the military. However, the combination of non-state armed groups and trafficking networks operating along various poorly policed Latin American borders raises intense concerns that these frontiers have become the focal points for organized crime and non-state powers, displacing instability, institutional malaise and civil violence from one country to the next.

The notion that a hemispheric "threat" may be emerging at these borders, requiring regional cooperation around a cluster of shared security concerns, was crystallized in the defence made by Colombian and US authorities of the military incursion against the FARC rearguard camp in Ecuador at the meeting of OAS foreign ministers on March 17. This approach, officially sanctioned by the region's defence ministers in Quito in 2004, lies at the heart of the US Southern Command's strategy document to 2016, in which particular stress is laid on the destabilizing influence of militia and other armed factions, which "do not operate within traditional nation-state boundaries. They live among and terrorize the populace, and take advantage of ungoverned and under-governed spaces across the hemisphere."³⁹ The document elaborates upon a model of deepening pan-regional cooperation aimed at creating a "hemispheric security environment that is inclusive and beneficial to all".⁴⁰

For the governments of Ecuador and Venezuela, supported by almost all their counterparts in Latin America, these hemispheric threats did not justify the abrogation of territorial sovereignty rights. Colombia, in their view, did not so much invoke the mutual responsibility to respond to shared threats, as over-extend a military strategy that had merely served to displace an internal security problem. According to this view, the security policies and economic dynamics that force armed actors and criminal networks towards border regions cause instability to spread across frontiers, entailing greater confusion and dispute over which central state is entitled to intervene. In short, they intensify the threat to real national sovereignty, and thus serve to make international cooperation harder at the same time as they make it more necessary.

However, signs of an increasing reliance on military leadership in steering US policy towards Latin America - through the Southern Command's strategy document, support for the Mérida Initiative, a greater role for the Pentagon in military aid and the recent deployment of the Fourth Fleet⁴¹ - suggest that concerted moves are afoot to give substance to Washington's insistence on a tighter regional security regime.

The suitability of this hemispheric response to the quandaries of Latin America's borders is highly questionable. Frontier cooperation between Colombia and Venezuela, and between Colombia and Ecuador, has been effectively suspended since the March 1 attack; multilateral organizations such as the Organization for American States, or Brazil's recently proposed Council for South American Security, must now play a key role in repairing and reconstructing the foundation for a consensual, transnational conception of regional security⁴². But how should security policy

³⁹ United States Southern Command (2007), Command Strategy 2016. Partnership for the Americas, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴¹ See Withers, G., Isacson, A., Haugaard, L., Olson, J. and Fyke, J. (2008), Ready, Aim, Foreign Policy, Washington Office on Latin America: Washington DC.

⁴² i.e. Gratis, S. (2008), "¿Hacia un OTAN sudamericana? Brasil y un Consejo de Defensa Sudamericano" FRIDE comentario; Varas, A. (2008), "Brasil en Sudamérica: De la indiferencia a la hegemonía", FRIDE comentario.

proceed and be implemented in border areas when instability and violence are easily displaced from one country to the next? What security role should be given to the primary regional powers, notably Mexico and Brazil, when the governments of these countries themselves have a huge political interest in weakening or displacing domestic criminal networks and armed groups, particularly in key strategic areas such as the Brazilian Amazon? And what voice should be given to members of those communities in border areas that are most affected by the absence of the state and the proliferation of alternative powers?

It is evident that attempts to impose a militarized conception of security in an effort to seal borders or eliminate criminal networks may produce immediate benefits, especially in terms of clearing a given territory of traffickers and purging rotten public institutions; for these reasons, it remains a constant temptation to Latin American leaders. However, in a context of intensifying and highly profitable licit and illicit economic flows, and given the diversity of networks competing to control key trading commodities and routes and the involvement of local business elites, is it really possible to stall illegal trafficking using conventional security policies? Such interventions have tended in Colombia, Mexico and Central America to accentuate the sort of territorial displacement and institutional vulnerability which, over the long-term, serve to weaken central governments' claims to genuine sovereignty over the borderlands. In the absence of any substantial effort to consolidate the state's non-security presence in these areas, these policies may purport to eliminate local strongmen and armed factions only to enable them to re-emerge once the military offensive loses steam, and to broker the next stage in the expansion of lucrative transborder networks.

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