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Department of Defense Strategic Evaluation
of Mexico and Central America Border Security (2013-2018)
Public Summary

The Department of Defense (DoD) conducts strategic evaluations of security cooperation programs and activities pursuant to 10 U.S.C. 383, and DoD Instruction 5132.14, “Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise. The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Partnerships (ODASD(GP)) and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) initiated a strategic evaluation to assess security cooperation programming in Mexico and Central America, specifically DoD-led border security (BORSEC) efforts from 2013-2018.

DoD contracted Vysnova Partners with support from DevTech, both independent commercial research firms, to undertake the independent strategic evaluation of DoD border security cooperation efforts in Central America. The evaluation, “Strategic Evaluation of U.S. Department of Defense Border Security—Security Cooperation Programming in Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras,” spanned the 2013 to 2018 period. This summary, developed by ODASD(GP), provides unclassified primary findings, conclusions, and recommendations derived from the evaluation.

This evaluation answered three questions:

1. How and to what extent have U.S.-led border security cooperation initiatives affected U.S. bilateral and multilateral relations in the region?
2. What have been the outcomes of U.S. efforts to improve partner BORSEC capabilities and capacities?
3. What are the fundamental changes to the security environment in the region that can be attributed to U.S.-led security cooperation efforts?

Methodology: The research evaluated security cooperation (SC) activities categorized as BORSEC in Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from 2013 – 2018. The evaluation team used a mixed-methods approach that included both qualitative and quantitative data on DoD's BORSEC-related SC efforts during the evaluation period in the focus countries to answer the evaluation questions. This approach included desk research of strategic documents; key informant interviews (KIIs); purposive non-random and snowball sampling; and thematic coding of qualitative data.

Scope: The team evaluated programs authorized under provisions of title 10, U.S. Code, and implemented from 2013 to 2018 within the focus countries on aspects of BORSEC. DoD BORSEC-related activities in scope primarily relied on counter narcotics (CN) and counter-transnational organized crime (CTOC) authorities, and thus their activities were primarily CN or CTOC oriented. Therefore, in assessing BORSEC programming, this evaluation focuses heavily on CN efforts and uses CTOC-related and CN-related indicators to address the evaluation questions.

The team bifurcated some of its findings and conclusions between the Central America (CENTAM) focus countries and Mexico. Mexico lies within the USNORTHCOM area of

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responsibility (AOR), while CENTAM focus countries are situated in the USSOUTHCOM AOR.

Evaluation Constraints: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation team was unable to travel to the applicable geographic Combatant Command (CCMD) headquarters or any of the focus countries, which limited the number of foreign military officials who participated in KIIs. This prevented a comprehensive assessment of DoD security cooperation programming. The team also found limited reliable and systematically collected data on security cooperation efforts and outcomes, including data about those efforts' effect on partner military capacity or capability for BORSEC. Neither baseline measures of partner BORSEC capabilities, nor monitoring data on the progress of SC programs throughout their lifecycles were available. Finally, the team was unable to segregate BORSEC programming authorized under title 10, U.S. Code, from programming by other actors. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and a range of other actors implemented a wide range of potentially overlapping programming, making it difficult to attribute outcomes to DoD-led border SC programming.

Background and Strategic Context: The predominant security challenge in Central America is transnational organized crime (TOC) activities, driven by the sourcing, transportation, and distribution of narcotics. TOC groups move narcotics and other illicit products around and across borders of the focus countries, creating regional security issues.

In the USNORTHCOM AOR focus, Mexico, the United States faces security threats such as illicit trafficking activities and other transnational and irregular threats. At the CCMD level, there were many commonalities in the USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM approaches, but several distinct differences. Both CCMDs sought to use security cooperation activities to reduce TOC groups' ability to operate and traffic illicit goods to increase U.S. and regional security. USNORTHCOM prioritized strengthening Mexico as a near-peer security partner capable of mutual defense against shared security threats to eliminate TOC groups' ability to operate, while USSOUTHCOM aimed to contain TOC activity to a level that partner nations (PNs) and U.S. law enforcement could manage.

Findings and Conclusions: The evaluation team also sought to provide data on how title 10 SC programming addressed U.S. strategic objectives in Mexico and Central America, specifically the impact that DoD-funded SC programming had on strategic competition between the United States, China, Russia, and other potentially malign actors engaged in these AORs.

The below findings span the organizational, overarching, and country levels. Organizational findings and conclusions focus on security cooperation AM&E frameworks and DoD-interagency collaboration in the focus countries. The team organized the remaining findings by evaluation question and focus on overall observations of BORSEC SC programming as well as country and region-specific observations.

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Organizational Findings:

- **Lack of operationalized definition of key concepts.** Given the multiple variables relevant to BORSEC, it is difficult to link programmatic outcomes to higher-level impacts. For example, there is no DoD-specific definition of BORSEC, making it difficult for any assessment of SC programming to determine whether that programming is effective in achieving related objectives. The lack of operationalized definitions of key concepts limits the creation of proper indicators to measure programming effectiveness and improve programming.
- **CCMDs are unable to measure the success of some programming towards strategic objectives.** There are no indicators defined for high-level strategic objectives, complicating conclusions about the effectiveness of SC in accomplishing high-level strategic objectives.
- **Overall, U.S. Government departments and agencies poorly coordinated their BORSEC programs in the USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM AORs.** A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach did not exist across agencies. The U.S. Department of State (DOS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) shared an M&E framework. However, DoD was not included in the design of the M&E framework, and each agency had different missions and metrics to measure BORSEC. Interagency coordination among U.S. Government stakeholders was poor.

Question 1: How and to what extent have U.S.-led border SC initiatives affected U.S. bilateral and multilateral relations in the region?

Findings:

- Overall, U.S.-Mexico military bilateral relations improved significantly between 2013 and 2018, but this improvement varied across components.
- **The Defense Bilateral Strategic Framework (DBSF) was successful in improving the bilateral relationship with Mexico.** The beginning of the evaluation period saw high levels of distrust of the United States by Mexico. The DBSF facilitated communication between USNORTHCOM and Mexico and created a forum in which Mexico had an active role in driving SC programming. The result was a much stronger relationship between Mexico and the United States.
- **Mexico is a mature security cooperation partner, capable of leading multilateral initiatives:** Mexico has a high level of existing capacity in leading multilateral initiatives as is evidenced in Mexico hosting large multilateral events and fulfilling of leadership roles in multilateral organizations. However, internal security challenges and Mexico's national principle of non-intervention hinder its ability to engage regionally and globally and grow as a security exporter.
- **U.S. bilateral relations in CENTAM are positive:** The CENTAM focus countries demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with the United States on security cooperation activities related to CN, CTOC, and CT. CENTAM partners engaged with the United States bilaterally in joint patrols to address maritime crime, contributed to U.S.

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Counterterrorism (CT) efforts globally, engaged in long-term Institutional Capacity Building (ICB) efforts, and addressed a law regarding air-space travel which hindered U.S. efforts.

- **U.S.-led multilateral initiatives helped increase cooperation between CENTAM countries:** Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S) is a highly utilized resource for multilateral cooperation among the CENTAM partners, including in uses for maritime BORSEC activities and information sharing.

Conclusions:

- **The United States was the partner of choice for the focus countries in terms of security cooperation, thereby limiting near-peer competitors' influence.** While other near-peer competitors actively sought to make inroads in the focus countries, partners preferred to collaborate with the United States because of the quality of U.S. security cooperation programming. USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM officials identified relationships as the most meaningful aspect of security cooperation.
- **The United States facilitated multilateral initiatives in the region by supporting PNs' leadership of such initiatives, allowing for greater multilateral relationship building.** Multilateral cooperation among partners would be limited without U.S., Colombian, and Mexican efforts. Initiatives such as the United States-Colombia Action Plan (USCAP), Central America Security Conference (CENTSEC), and JIATF-S played critical roles in facilitating multilateral cooperation.

Question 2: What have been the outcomes of U.S. efforts to improve allied Partner Nations (PNs) BORSEC capabilities and capacities?

Findings:

- **Improved Interoperability.** Security cooperation programming improved U.S. interoperability with Mexican forces through common equipment systems and increased information/intelligence sharing. The U.S.-provided equipment focused on enhancing communications and intelligence capabilities. Broadly, security cooperation programming in the USSOUTHCOM AOR improved interoperability with and among PN forces.
- **Minor improvements to capacity.** The equipment and construction provided by the United States to Mexico extended the range and capacity of Mexican forces for CTOC activities, but U.S.-provided training, prior to 2016, did not meet the Mexican military's needs because the Mexican military's capabilities were more advanced than the training provided. This issue was addressed by (i) increased relationship-building between the United States and Mexico, and (ii) providing training under new U.S. security cooperation authorities in FY 2017 that authorized training for purposes other than CN and C-TOC activities.
- **Sustainability.** Biometrics equipment and training provided to the Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR - Mexican Navy) led to sustainable outcomes in programming. However,

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maintenance of this costly communication equipment has been limited, resulting in Mexican forces reverting to inferior means of communication.

Conclusions:

- U.S. programming in Mexico actively contributed to the cooperative defense of the USNORTHCOM AOR and helped to counter Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) activities by improving the capabilities of Mexican armed forces. However, these end states could have been better met if the United States had provided Mexico with training that was tailored to the Mexican military's advanced capabilities throughout the entire evaluation period
- **U.S. Dependence:** Programming authorized under title 10, U.S. Code, improved all CENTAM partners' military capabilities, including capabilities to counter TOC actors and illicit trafficking. However, many of these improvements were not sustainable without continued U.S. support. Some capabilities were also too advanced for CENTAM partners' military forces to use effectively.
- **Colombia as a Regional Security Anchor:** Training provided through USCAP allowed partners to learn from regional counterparts and share common experiences, promoting multilateral relations.
- **Achieving Shared Objectives:** Partners worked with U.S. Government agencies to achieve shared BORSEC objectives. Panama has begun to develop a multilateral coordinating entity based on JIATF-S for Panama, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Colombia, representing a positive development for interoperability between PNs.

Question 3: What are the fundamental changes to the security environment in the region that can be attributed to U.S.-led SC efforts?

Findings:

- Despite partner capability improvements, the security environment in the USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM AORs has not changed significantly during the evaluation period, due in part to conditions within the security environment outside of the scope of DoD functions, such as socioeconomic conditions (e.g., poor economic opportunities and corruption) that drive instability in these PNs.
- Three CENTAM countries, Costa Rica, Panama, and El Salvador, have joined China's Belt and Road Initiative.
- Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras increased cooperation with Russia through security agreements. However, partners have also pushed back against Russia's regional influxes. For example, Guatemala rejected a Russian offer of a complete arms package and training because the United States was Guatemala's partner of choice.

Conclusions:

- **Limited security changes:** SC programming is necessary for building partners' detection, monitoring, and interdiction capabilities, but is insufficient for fundamentally

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changing the security environment (which depends upon factors outside of the scope of SC programming).

- SC programming in the USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM AORs led to tactical-level capability improvements, including an increase in maritime drug interdictions and DMI operations, and improved interoperability in the focus countries.
- **China and Russia have expanded their economic and military influence in both AORs** and may fill any gaps in SC programming not addressed left by the United States. DoD SC mitigates the influence of near-peer competitors.
 - Russia is attempting to make inroads through SC agreements in CENTAM and Mexico and is gaining traction in the region. For example, PNs, including Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, have increased cooperation with Russia through security agreements, specifically related to CTOC and CN.
 - While China's SC efforts have increased in the region during the evaluation period, China's focus was on economic relationship building.

Recommendations:

- **Mexico:**
 - USNORTHCOM should assess if training of Mexican armed forces is now appropriate for the levels of existing capacity and capability of the Mexican military. If the insufficiency has not been fully addressed, coordinate with relevant counterparts through the DBSF to adapt training to meet the existing capacity of the Mexican military.
 - USNORTHCOM should continue to engage with Mexico as a mature security cooperation partner and work closely with Mexican counterparts through the DBSF to develop Mexico into a near-peer security provider and exporter.
- **CENTAM:**
 - USSOUTHCOM should conduct a sustainability assessment for security cooperation efforts with a focus on ensuring adherence to the requirements of 10 U.S.C. 333, including incorporating an appropriate institutional and operational capacity analysis as part of planning for significant SC initiatives.
 - USSOUTHCOM should conduct an assessment to ensure that the issues of limited PN absorptive capacities, which led to the unsustainability of programming during the evaluation period, have been addressed. The review should aim to ensure that proper equipment is being provided to PNs and that PNs have the absorptive capacity to continue to use the equipment with limited to no U.S. assistance. The assessment should be reviewed and verified with PNs.
- **Organizational:**
 - USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM should develop theater- and country-level operationalized definitions of BORSEC and related objectives that include appropriate indicators.
 - The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD(P)) should assess how DoD can support U.S. Government interagency efforts that complement DoD's BORSEC-related objectives.

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Evaluation Results: In accordance with DoD Instruction 5132.14, “Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise,” the Department is considering recommendations and lessons learned from this evaluation to make adjustments to policy, programs, and resource allocation decisions, including the following:

- *Implementing Recommendations:* The Department is developing an internal action plan in coordination with primary stakeholder organizations to consider and implement useful recommendations from this and other evidence-building activities on similar topics.
- *Contributions to security cooperation Performance Management Framework:* DoD disseminated the evaluation teams’ findings across the Department to support learning and process improvement. Content of the evaluation will be entered into a security cooperation activity database.

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