

STRATEGIC POLICY FORUM

Exercise *Deadly Venture*

Quick Look Report

September 23, 2009

On September 22, 2009, National Defense University's Strategic Policy Forum (SPF) conducted its twenty-eighth Congressional exercise, *Deadly Venture*, which explored the linkages and threats posed by the nexus between illicit narcotics trafficking and terrorism and the rising power and influence of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs). The exercise scenario focused on the Latin America region and the U.S. – Mexico border. Five Members of the House of Representatives participated in the exercise along with senior Executive Branch officials from the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, Justice, Homeland Security, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Vice Admiral Ann Rondeau, USN, President, National Defense University opened the exercise, emphasizing the importance of using forums like SPF to take time away from day-to-day priority issues such as Afghanistan to gain a deeper understanding of other national security issues, including the threats associated with global drug trafficking networks. In her introductory remarks, Ms. Christine Wormuth, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Americas' Security Affairs, underscored the value of the SPF program in providing Members of Congress and Executive Branch officials the opportunity to think strategically about important issues and suggested that *Deadly Venture* provided an opportunity to enhance whole of government collaboration on complex functional and regional issues affecting security in the Western Hemisphere and within and along our borders. *The total number of Congressional visits to these exercises now stands at 228 (18 Senate; 210 House).*¹

Key Observations

- Participants suggested the public are generally unaware of the cost of the drug problem in terms of dollars, lives and risk to national security; consequently, the political will and sense of urgency to confront domestic demand for illicit drugs in a more comprehensive way is lacking. The huge domestic demand signal was identified as a root cause of the illicit drug problem, but supply reduction receives the preponderance of federal resource allocation. Historically, interdiction was cited at 22-23 percent, and it was noted that Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) South, for example, only had the capacity to respond to 50 percent of actionable intelligence. One participant likened the focus on supply reduction to treating the symptoms vice the disease and suggested the U.S. Military's approach to eliminate its rampant drug use problem of the 1970s might inform a demand reduction strategy. Participants generally agreed that demand reduction is the key to an effective long-term strategy.
- To make demand reduction a national priority, it was recommended that the President explicitly engage the American public as to the existential nature of the drug problem and the threat it poses to U.S. national security, and that of the other Western Hemisphere nations. A revitalized 'just say no' campaign could be part of this engagement strategy, but significantly greater emphasis is needed. Some participants suggested that making the case that the drug problem is a clear and present danger and explaining the strong linkages between narco-trafficking and the threat of terrorism would be an effective ways of focusing the public's attention.
- Several participants suggested that the U.S. counterdrug strategy should place greater emphasis on areas that it has more direct ability to influence—demand reduction and the outward flow of weapons and bulk cash. It was suggested that the U.S. should focus more on reducing weapons trafficking from the U.S. to Mexico in response to rising drug related violence. Some, however, were skeptical about the likelihood of keeping weapons out the hands of Mexican DTOs, suggesting that a reduction in the flow of weapons from the U.S. would be negated by an increase from other sources of supply, such as China or those in caches from the wars in Central America.

¹ *Deadly Venture* represented a significant departure from past Congressional exercises in that it was conducted on Capitol Hill, involved a single game "move," and was two hours in duration. All previous Congressional exercises have been conducted at National Defense University, involved multiple game moves, and were approximately four hours long.

- Most participants agreed that interagency collaboration in counter-drug efforts, while good in some areas needs to improve more broadly. The U.S. could better incentivize interagency collaboration through career advancement policies and other mechanisms. Three mechanisms were cited by participants as models for interagency cooperation:
 - The Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, which requires the Treasury Department to coordinate the sanctioning of significant foreign narcotics traffickers with other Federal agencies.
 - Border Enforcement Security Task Forces (BESTs), an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) lead multiagency partnership which includes federal, state, local and foreign law enforcement agencies.
 - JIATF South, which coordinates the interdiction efforts of numerous agencies in the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility.
- Noting that the border currently represents an opportunity vice an impediment to Mexican DTOs, several participants suggested the U.S. consider a paradigm shift in its intelligence approach to enhance collection, analysis and dissemination. To enhance awareness of the DTO situation on the ground in Mexican towns and cities, it was recommended that the U.S. make better use of community level organizations and other contacts to the Mexican community such as churches, Spanish language media outlets, American businesses that operate in Mexico, and the large American expatriate community in Mexico. Some participants suggested that the flow of information and intelligence is sometimes too one sided—the U.S. constantly placing pressure on Mexican agencies to provide information but being reluctant to reciprocate due to concerns over corruption and security—which undermines the U.S.-Mexico relationship. It was also recommended that the U.S. expand efforts to train Mexican intelligence organizations so that they become more capable of developing actionable intelligence. One participant recommended establishing a National Intelligence Officer for Counternarcotics to facilitate the change of paradigm.
- Citing the rampant corruption within Mexico’s law enforcement organizations, a few participants emphasized that a key element in the U.S. drug control strategy is, by necessity, improving cooperation with Mexico’s Armed Forces, which are considered among the most reliable institutions in Mexico, and are currently leading the fight against Mexican DTOs. U.S.-Mexico military-to-military engagement and cooperation, which have greatly improved over the past 18 months, will remain an essential to the cross-border counterdrug effort until Mexico is able to reform its key civilian institutions and governance and relieve the military of its internal security role. It was noted that getting full Merida funding was key to building Mexico’s military counterdrug capacity.
- Several participants commented that the adaptability of DTOs necessitated a regional approach as pressuring them in Mexico has prompted them to displace their operations to other areas. With this in mind, the U.S. Congress should reconsider both foreign and military aid restrictions to at risk countries such as Guatemala and other Central American nations. It was noted that long standing restrictions related to past human rights abuses have limited DoD’s ability to shore up the Guatemalan military’s capability to respond in to a rapidly developing crisis. It was also noted that the National Guard could add to focused efforts intended to enhance the counterdrug capabilities of at risk states.
- While direct operational ties between profit-motivated DTOs and politically motivated terrorist organizations are not likely, it was emphasized that 60-65% of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are using drug trafficking and other profitable criminal enterprises to raise funds. As international terrorism becomes more decentralized and traditional fund raising through charities and state sponsors become more difficult, it is likely that narco-trafficking will play an increasing role in funding terrorism.