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Reviewing Land Border Dynamics in the Western Hemisphere

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Introduction

The land borders of Latin America have long been stereotyped as *tierras de nadie* or ‘no-man’s lands,’ generally located far away from political capitals and industrial centers and ripe for all types of contraband and illegal activities. In modern times, we see the tension between security actors seeking to exert greater physical control over land borders while the private sector wants goods to flow more freely and more quickly through official border crossings and customs posts.

The most salient border issues in the Americas today include illegal migration, human trafficking, narco-trafficking, and arms smuggling all of which can be linked to cartels and subnational organizations who take advantage of weak enforcement and freedom of movement to travel between countries with relative ease. These smuggling networks supply demand for drugs, weapons, and labor throughout the hemisphere. The United States is a final destination, and sometimes a source as in the case of illicit firearms, for many of these contraband goods, as well as for migrants escaping violence and economic stagnation in their countries of origin, especially in the Northern Triangle of Central America - from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.¹ Immigration and illicit narcotics trafficking are the two most politically sensitive issues between the United States and Mexico, though there are other important concerns related to river management and industrial policy along the border.

In both Central and South America, official attempts at achieving border control have largely fallen short, and the obstacles posed by geography and resource availability suggest the unregulated flow of goods and persons may never be completely controllable.² Certain government efforts, however, have demonstrated greater promise including joint military operations and increased economic regulations.³ Other measures, such as internationally-supported development and governance aid, have achieved marginal gains in improved standards of living and support for

law enforcement, but these do little to transform the security situation in border zones.

A group of university students working with Professor William Godnick at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies has embarked upon an effort to bring more light to the border dynamics throughout the Western Hemisphere. We demonstrate that the rhetoric and politics around the U.S./Mexico border might be unique, but the underlying issues are very much the same and are similar to the challenges of economic under-development and weak governance throughout the region. Our report starts by taking current and historical snapshots of security, development and governance at each of the borders described, and is followed by a brief review of more recent policy measures taken to address the problems identified. This edition reviews the dynamics surrounding the borders between Mexico and Guatemala; El Salvador and Honduras; and the Tri-Border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. The primary purpose is to make the land border challenges faced by partner nations in the Western Hemisphere more accessible to interested policy audiences in the United States.

¹ Diao, Alexis. "Central American Migrants Arrive at U.S. Border to an Uncertain Future." *NPR*. April 29, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/29/606890139/central-american-migrants-arrive-at-u-s-border-to-an-uncertain-future>

² "United States-Mexico Borderlands/Frontera." Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/bord/intro.html>

³ Pelcastre, Julieta. "Guatemala and Mexico Update Border Security Strategy." *Dialogo*. January 12, 2018. <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/guatemala-and-mexico-update-border-security-strategy>

Mexico-Guatemala Border

Despite the strong cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties which link Mexico and Guatemala, the border region between the two former Mayan countries is home to deadly violence and widespread organized crime.⁴ The 540 miles of terrain which connect Mexico and Guatemala represent a history of underdevelopment and lack of state presence, providing a relatively porous point of entry for migrants from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America - namely Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador - to continue northward.⁵ Unchecked migration is just one of numerous security concerns in this region. The sustained flow of illicit goods and people across Mexico's southern border has far-reaching regional implications.



Immigration and human trafficking represent a significant challenge for Mexico and Guatemala, as rampant human smuggling occurs in broad daylight

with relative impunity. Mexican authorities cite a lack of resources and political sensitivities as constraining factors in the effort to maintain control over official and unofficial crossing points. Guatemala lacks a coherent independent border security policy of its own, with already scarce resources directed towards domestic development and domestic law enforcement geographically distant from the border.⁶ In recent years, as the flow of migrants and contraband into the United States from Central America has increased, Mexico has faced mounting pressure to improve its enforcement capabilities on its southern border, resulting in the 2014 implementation of the *Programa Frontera Sur* initiative targeting security at entry points with Guatemala as well as regaining control of Mexico's internal railroad system.⁷ In addition to the *Programa Frontera Sur*, an essential aspect of Mexico's efforts to improve its border security has been bilateral cooperation with Guatemalan security forces, updated and reaffirmed at the annual Local Meeting of Border Commanders. The most recent of these bilateral meetings, convened in the fall of 2017, emphasized information exchange and freedom of cross-border movement for naval forces, as well as regular coordinated land, air, and sea patrols. These collaborative regional efforts have demonstrated some success, as indicated by the increased number of apprehensions and detentions of undocumented migrants and the effective reclaiming of the infamous '*La Bestia*' cross-country railroad line which takes migrants northward.⁸

⁴ Meeke, Kieran. "Mexico: the history of the Maya." *Saga Magazine*. November 24, 2016. <https://www.saga.co.uk/magazine/travel/destinations/north-america/mexico/mexico-the-history-of-the-maya>

⁵ Rotella, Sebastian. "The New Border: Illegal Immigration's Shifting Frontier." *Foreign Policy*. December 6, 2012. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/06/the-new-border-illegal-immigrations-shifting-frontier/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Castillo, Alejandra. "Programa Frontera Sur: The Mexican Government's Faulty Immigration Policy." Council on Hemispheric Affairs. October 26, 2016. <http://www.coha.org/programa-frontera-sur-the-mexican-governments-faulty-immigration-policy/>

⁸ Pelcastre, Julieta. "Guatemala and Mexico Update Border Security Strategy." *Diálogo*. January 12, 2018. <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/guatemala-and-mexico-update-border-security-strategy>

The porous border also poses a challenge in the monitoring and control of cross-border illicit trade. In addition, weak enforcement capabilities on both sides of the Mexico/Guatemala border encourage illicit firearms and narcotics trafficking and all forms of contraband.⁹ Periodic surges in counter-narcotics operations in Mexico, most notably in 2006, have demonstrated some success, as extraditions of traffickers to the United States have since doubled and key maritime import hubs have been drawn back under government control. This strategy has succeeded in disrupting the supply chain of cocaine to the United States, shifting trafficking routes southward from Mexico to Guatemala and Honduras. This shift has dramatically increased the relative importance of Central America in the transportation component of the illicit narcotics supply chain.¹⁰ Guatemala in particular provides access to key transport routes over land and by water including crossings at the Suchiate River along the westernmost border with Mexico.¹¹

El Salvador-Honduras Border

Much like Mexico and Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras share a common history and culture. A border spanning 159 miles separates the two countries, which suffer from some of the highest homicide rates in the hemisphere.¹² The backdrop to border security concerns between Honduras and El Salvador is a his-

tory of disputed territory, dating back to 18th century colonial practices and several subsequent failed attempts at mediation. The centuries-old tensions between the two came to a head in the 1969 conflict known as the Soccer War, a conflict which resulted in thousands of deaths, injuries, and displaced persons. The conflict was resolved by a peace treaty signed in 1980, which called for arbitration of the boundary dispute by the International Court of Justice under the auspices of the United Nations. The ruling, accepted by both parties in 1992, established the present-day borders, awarding more territory and assuring access to the Pacific Ocean to Honduras. The Treaty also determined the citizenship regulations in the disputed territories (called *bolsones* in Spanish) which have been further clarified in the years since, though questions of dual nationality remain nebulous for many inhabitants of these regions.¹³



⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. September 2012. http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf

¹¹ Rotella, Sebastian. "The New Border: Illegal Immigration's Shifting Frontier." *Foreign Policy*. December 6, 2012. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/06/the-new-border-illegal-immigrations-shifting-frontier/>

¹² Babineau, Kathryn and Douglas Farah. "The Rapid Evolution of the MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras from Gang to Tier-One Threat to Central America and U.S. Security Interests." Perry Center Occasional Paper. William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies. March 2018. http://williamjerrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication_associated_files/The%20Rapid%20Evolution%20of%20the%20MS13%20in%20El%20Salvador%20and%20Honduras_0.pdf

¹³ Merrill, Tim. "Border Disputes." Honduras: A Country Study. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress. 1995. <http://countrystudies.us/honduras/33.htm>; Martínez, Hugo. "Respondiendo a nuestros hermanos en 'los bolsones.'" *Elsalvador.com*. September 11, 2017. <https://www.elsalvador.com/opinion/editoriales/395971/respondiendo-a-nuestros-hermanos-en-los-bolsones/>; Babineau, Kathryn and Douglas Farah. "The Rapid Evolution of the MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras from Gang to Tier-One Threat to Central America and U.S. Security Interests." Perry Center Occasional Paper. William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies. March 2018. http://williamjerrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication_associated_files/The%20Rapid%20Evolution%20of%20the%20MS13%20in%20El%20Salvador%20and%20Honduras_0.pdf

gion, the liberal travel policies for citizens of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala have been exploited by ambitious Mexican cartels, who take advantage of this freedom of movement and goods to conduct illicit cross-border activities.¹⁴ The Pan-American Highway through the Americas, though beneficial for travel and trade, is also an avenue for cross-border trafficking, and is subject to intense competition for control by alliances of cartels in Central America.¹⁵

Argentina/Brazil/Paraguay Border

The Tri-Border Region shared by Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay has long been a hub of intense economic activity which, in keeping with the previous two examples, has provided ample opportunity for exploitation by criminal actors. Since the 1960s, the region's generous tax legislation and reputation for ease of commerce have attracted an international audience of merchants, especially of Arab-Lebanese origin. The first wave of Christian-Arab immigrants in the early 20th century has been well integrated into the business communities of each of the three countries. More recent Muslim-Arab immigration has sparked some anti-Islamic sentiment in the Tri-Border Region. Tourists from Brazil and abroad also flock to the region annually, seeking to take advantage of the weak customs enforcement and low import tariffs.¹⁶ The three major cities located at the border - Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, Puerto Iguazú in Argentina, and Foz do Iguazú in Brazil - are thriving commercial centers whose residents engage in

both lawful and illicit cross-border commerce across the Paraná River. The 'Friendship Bridge' alone, between Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguazú, accounts for an estimated \$5 billion of trade annually, the majority of which is not officially authorized.¹⁷ Despite the relative geographical isolation of the Tri Border, it is nonetheless of strategic interest to a variety of regional and international players because of the presence of violent organized crime, trafficking in goods and people, and the alleged presence of terrorist actors.¹⁸ Illegal triangulation, or the legal importing and illegal exporting of goods between two or more countries, has been documented frequently in recent history, including high volumes of tobacco transported by multinational companies.¹⁹



¹⁴ "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. September 2012. http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf

¹⁵ Alini, Erica. "The List: The World's Top Immigrant Smuggling Routes." *Foreign Policy*. June 18, 2007. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2007/06/18/the-list-the-worlds-top-immigrant-smuggling-routes/>

¹⁶ Oualalou, Lamia. "The Arabs of Latin America." *The Nation*. July 12, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/arabs-latin-america/>

¹⁷ Folch, Christine. "Trouble on the Triple Frontier." *Foreign Affairs*. September 6, 2012. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/argentina/2012-09-06/trouble-triple-frontier>

¹⁸ "Organized crime networks targeted in INTERPOL-coordinated operation in Tri-Border area." *INTERPOL*. April 15, 2016. <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-media/News/2016/N2016-047>

¹⁹ Blasco, Emili J. "Paraguay mantiene su record como foco Americano del contraband de tabaco." <https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-paraguay-mantiene-record-como-foco-americano-contrabando-tabaco-201707250126-noticia.html>

In contrast to the borders of Mexico and Central America, the most politically salient security concern at the Triple Frontier is not migration or the smuggling of persons - though human trafficking is one aspect of a broader environment of pervasive illegal economic conduct and crime - but rather counterfeiting and trafficking in contraband.²⁰ Disparities and gaps in criminal codes, financial legislation, and commercial regulations among the three countries encourage firearms and drug trafficking. Such activities, which rely on the complicity of local authorities, are therefore often conducted in the open, taking advantage of the Paraná River and the Guaraní International Airport in Ciudad del Este to facilitate the transport of marijuana and cocaine around the world.²¹ In 2012, in an attempt to disrupt these extensive networks and restore order to the Tri-Border, the governments of Brazil and Paraguay enacted the Unified Tax Regime, legislation to formalize cross-border trade by increasing surveillance and documentation of goods related to information technology and electronics. Additionally, in April 2016 Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina engaged in a trilateral operation, coordinated by INTERPOL, targeting organized crime in the border region. The endeavor, which was the first of its kind to involve law enforcement from all three of the Tri Border countries, resulted in arrests and seizures of large volumes of contraband, including drugs, firearms, and stolen vehicles. The operation was both a victory for the combined forces, demonstrating the effectiveness of information sharing and cooperative security, and a stark reminder of the scale of the challenges at hand,

as evidenced by the large and complex network of actors uncovered.²²

One unique corollary to the transnational criminal networks at the Triple Frontier is the alleged association of some local actors with Islamic terrorism, especially Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. After attacks carried out in Buenos Aires in the 1990s were claimed by Islamic Jihad, the U.S. government established the 2002 3+1 Group on Tri-Border Area Security program, with the intention of implementing improved surveillance and anti-terrorism measures with Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina. After several years of joint training exercises and investigation, the U.S. uncovered no detectable terrorist presence, and at the time rescinded the program. Nearly a decade later, raids such as that carried out in 2016 have unearthed money laundering schemes in the region, carried out by Hezbollah operatives - many living on the Paraguay side - utilizing the porous frontier and a lack of regulatory enforcement to traffic drugs and export the subsequent profits abroad.²³ There may also be ties between Hezbollah and the Brazilian *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, a criminal gang involved in cocaine trafficking and control of prisons and favelas in Brazil.

Conclusions

The U.S. border with Mexico is not the only border in the Western Hemisphere that faces issues of illicit drugs, movements of humans, asymmetrical law enforcement capabilities, and disparate levels of economic development between neighboring countries that act as push and pull forces.

²⁰ "Organized crime networks targeted in INTERPOL-coordinated operation in Tri-Border area." *INTERPOL*. April 15, 2016. <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-media/News/2016/N2016-047>

²¹ Ottolenghi, Emanuele. "Lebanon is Protecting Hezbollah's Cocaine Trade in Latin America." *Foreign Policy*. June 15, 2018.

²² Folch, Christine. "Trouble on the Triple Frontier." *Foreign Affairs*. September 6, 2012. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/argentina/2012-09-06/trouble-triple-frontier>

²³ *Ibid.*

Military and civilian institutions from partner nations have engaged in a number of cross-border collaborations to address specific acts of criminality, as well as to address more structural issues. However, it seems clear that whatever positive efforts have been realized so far are insufficient in depth and frequency to have a sustained impact on defense, security and governance in the Western Hemisphere.

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