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From Mérida & CARSI to Obama's New Plan: Any Impact on the Gang Situation in Central America?

by

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Since the end of the Cold War, the United States (US) has been supporting Latin America's democracy and security through a series of diplomatic, social and security-related initiatives and programs.¹ Fighting gangs has been part of these endeavors since the early 1990s, when the U.S. government became aware of the challenges posed domestically by gangs and enacted numerous anti-gang initiatives. This article examines efforts by the US to counter the gang problem in Central America, including the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Mérida Initiative, as well as recent endeavors pursued by the Obama administration. The article also reviews the changes in Central American government attitudes toward fighting gangs, and assesses the impact (if any) of U.S. policies on the region's security.

Launched by U.S. president George W. Bush in 2007, the Mérida Initiative enabled the United States to provide resources, equipment, and training to Mexico and Central America to support law enforcement, foster interagency and regional cooperation, and assist security and judicial reforms. In 2010, Congress created the Central American Regional Security Initiative to separate Central America from the Mexico-focused Mérida Initiative.² CARSI sought to not only provide Central America with equipment and training, but also to strengthen the ability of government institutions to address security challenges and the underlying societal issues that have permeated regional insecurity.³

Prior to the Obama Administration, critics argued that the US did not invest sufficient thought, time, or resources in Central America, especially in relation to gangs. In light of President Obama's new plan for Central America, however, a shift in policy may be underway. Requesting \$1 billion for 2016, Obama's plan is almost three times what has generally been allocated to Central America.⁴ This new strategy takes a three-pronged approach, tackling security, good governance, and international investment in an effort to bring stability to the region. As Vice President Joe Biden stated, to keep ignoring Central America's security challenges will cause "the entire Western Hemisphere [to] feel the consequences"⁵. This multi-faceted approach may prove to be the start of what the region requires to combat insecurity.

¹ Bruneau, T., L. Dammert and E. Skinner (Eds). *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

² Seelke, Clare Ribando and Kristin Finklea. *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*. Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress, R41349, updated 8 April 2014.

³ Seelke, Clare Ribando and Peter J. Meyer. *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress, R41731, updated 6 May 2014

⁴ Biden, Jr., Joseph R. "Joe Biden: A Plan for Central America". *New York Times*. 29 Jan 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/opinion/joe-biden-a-plan-for-central-america.html?_r=2>

⁵ *Ibid*

Governments receiving U.S. aid in the region have also become more involved in the fight against gangs. In El Salvador, for example, a controversial gang truce was initiated in 2012, a drastic departure from the hard line approaches taken by the Northern Triangle countries in the past. While the truce was contentious from the start, it produced tangible results. After nine months, a 40 percent drop in murders was reported from the previous year.⁶ The trend continued in 2013, with homicides rates still falling. By the end of 2013, however, the truce disintegrated. Detractors contended that gangs had focused on increasing extortion and drug trade operations during the relative stability. By mid-2014, murders reached pre-truce levels.⁷ Instead of supporting the second gang truce signed in January 2015, the Salvadoran state will initiate new anti-crime plans with the support of the community police force,⁸ aligning with the Obama administration's plan for Central America regarding increasing community-based policing. President Salvador Sánchez Cerén stated that he also sees the need to “purge judges and the Police to remove those who impede ... effective ... work against insecurity”⁹, a modest indication that Central American governments may finally take steps toward overcoming institutional obstacles to effectively fight gangs.

So far, U.S. anti-gang policies in Central America have had sporadic success. The Mérida Initiative, for one, has provided governments with the theoretical and practical “democratic” toolkit against gangs, while specific joint law enforcement operations have occasionally resulted in successful anti-gang operations. But the overall effects on gang evolution in the region are fairly inconspicuous, mainly due to unreliable data. For example, after five years in place, little to no information is available concerning the outcomes of CARSÍ. U.S. agencies “reportedly monitor and report on CARSÍ through internal channels, but they have not publically released the metrics used to assess the initiative’s performance.”¹⁰ Unless this information is made available, any progress or limitations cannot be comprehensively evaluated.

On another note, despite all of the above-mentioned initiatives, there is need for more efforts. Central America’s gang problem is “long-term, and one for which there are no magic solutions.”¹¹ Like other kinds of crime, it “can be reduced but never eliminated.”¹² Indeed, given the region’s violent history, deeply ingrained official corruption, and chronic poverty, fighting gangs needs to remain an endless anticipative, strategic, and preparative process, aimed at minimizing to the degree possible the levels of violence, crime, and loss of life and property. The U.S. and the countries it supports in Central America need to focus on more attainable objectives in the fight against gangs, such as reforming justice institutions, instead of “defining the problem in absolute terms -- dismantling organized crime or stopping illegal drug flows. Such [unattainable] goals [...] guarantee costly failures.”¹³ Part of the reason gangs have proliferated throughout the region is because they “provide a modicum of safety, albeit perverse safety” to citizens who tend to have little trust in government due to historical legacies of corruption. States able to reduce violence do not remove the problem of gangs entirely, but “lessen [their] grip on society, thereby giving citizens greater confidence in government, encouraging citizen cooperation with

⁶ Gurney, Kyra. “El Salvador Homicides Skyrocket After Gang Truce Unravels”. InSight Crime. 9 Jan 2015. <<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-homicides-skyrocket-after-gang-truce-unravels>>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Calderon, Beatriz. “Cerén anuncia presentarán proyecto de ley contra extorsiones”. La Prensa Gráfica. 7 Feb 2015. <<http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2015/02/07/ceren-anuncia-presentaran-proyecto-de-ley- contra-extorsiones>>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Bruneau, T., L. Dammert and E. Skinner (Eds). *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Felbab-Brown, Vanda and Eric Olson. “A Better Strategy to Combat Organized Crime in Mexico and Central America.” Brookings Institution. 13 Apr 2012. <<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2012/04/13-crime-central-america-felbabbrown>>

law enforcement, and aiding the transformation of a national security threat into a public safety problem.”¹⁴

Arguably, U.S. anti-gang assistance for Central America will continue and, in line with the approach envisioned by both CARSI and the Obama Administration’s new plan, may be more effective in minimizing the gang threat. Focusing on realistic reforms, providing data, and committing to transparency on all sides should be the focus of future efforts in the region. These comprehensive approaches may be the only way to turn Central America from the Western Hemisphere’s problem child into its success story.

¹⁴ Ibid