

Blending U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America with Foreign Internal Defense

by Daniel E. Ward

The current security situation in the Northern Triangle of Central America (comprised of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) and southern Mexico is progressively deteriorating and not necessarily because of a lack of tools or resources. While more funding and manpower is always appreciated, current efforts lack a true regional focus that blends elements of the resource, training, and funding streams into a comprehensive strategy for the region. Limited-scope projects are not organized to complement one another across borders. The opposition in this venture, which includes drug trafficking organizations, transnational criminal organizations, and general security and stability constructs, does not adhere to borders. Therefore, the aid and assistance packages to the region must be nuanced to focus on actual regional stability.

To achieve greater success, the U.S. should employ an approach that blends resources and aid from the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America together with foreign internal defense (FID) mechanisms, specifically in terms of the Internal Defense and Development (IDAD) model, to project a more cohesive and strategic plan for dealing with the stability and security of the Northern Triangle and southern Mexico. To create a regional mission set, the U.S. must be willing to work as a partner, not as a paternal power, and coordinate through existing Latin American political apparatus, both directly with the affected nations and with regional organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS). This coordination will allow for greater buy-in from the affected states and potential partnering nations for assistance. Mexico will be a unique element, in that the focus will be on its southern border, particularly the state of Chiapas, and that its existing capabilities are much more significant than the Northern Triangle countries.

To maintain efficient command and control from the U.S. perspective, coordination of FID measures linked to the engagement strategy should be handled through U.S. Southern Command

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(SOUTHCOM). Thus, strategy would mean subordinating an area of U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) in terms of southern Mexico; however, this is not necessarily a new concept, as regular coordination in this area occurs between these two combatant commands. Within SOUTHCOM, the robust interagency mechanisms in place with Joint Interagency Task Force South (JITAF-South) can be leveraged as a command and control platform. A key element will be using the right personnel and expertise to meet the requirements unique to this venture. Such a FID mission should not rely solely on special operations personnel. Elements will need to work in a combined fashion, to include Special Forces personnel, as well as the National Guard, U.S. Coast Guard, law enforcement personnel, and conventional units. All units must focus on supporting host nation police and military forces, as well as civilian leadership and infrastructure.

Strategy and Internal Defense and Development

The U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America represents the newest model for addressing the security and stability issues in the region. As outlined in the strategy itself, desired goals include economic integration and opportunity, effective governance, and regional mechanisms for growth, all tied to three lines of action represented by prosperity, security, and governance.¹ This strategy recognizes that the actions under the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), while well intentioned, are beset with limited scope and lack of actual empirical progress. However, the newer strategy, while acknowledging these issues and even providing a line of action for enhanced security, still does little in terms of strategic development for furthering stability. The strategy defines the issue and gives broad guidance but lacks a workable framework to coordinate and direct long-term, regional planning that takes advantage of the existing resources and

more efficiently employs available manpower and funding. The IDAD Strategy Model can be employed to address this shortcoming by providing a tool for turning concepts into functional actions. IDAD, as defined in Joint Publication 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense* is “the full range of measures taken by a nation to promote its growth and to protect itself from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security.”² The concept rests upon the ideal that a host nation is given support but takes upon itself the primary responsibility for action. The IDAD Strategy Model provides a working framework for the development of needed support to a host nation, or in this case, a regional block of nations to promote security and stability. The model aligns strategic objectives focused on developing and mobilizing host-nation forces to deal with threats and increase security with actionable tools to best use U.S. military resources.

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The overarching problem for the Northern Triangle is the destabilization of the national governments and resulting security problems. While each nation is treated in turn, partners must objectively contend with the fact that “transnational organized crime can also be understood as a threat to regional stability.”³ Therefore, the countermeasures must integrate each nation rather than working individually. According to the Heritage Foundation’s *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, the nations of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador all face “rampant corruption and weak state institutions” that “have rendered central governments incapable of combating threats posed by violent transnational gangs and organized criminal

groups.”⁴ If this is the case, such instability so close to the U.S. warrants more than simple training and assistance packages; it demands an active support role under a strategic plan.

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In 2015, the Gallup’s Law and Order Index evaluated the world by dividing it into nine regions. For the seventh year in a row, Latin America and the Caribbean ranked last in terms of stability and security, a trend which continues today.⁵ This instability is greatly affected by Mexican cartels that operate in southern Mexico and the Northern Triangle, controlling transport and logistics for the movement of contraband northward. In fact, these transnational groups currently use the “Central American corridor to traffic 90% of cocaine destined for the United States, among other illicit activities.”⁶ The model in effect for transport represents an hourglass or funnel. With respect to the Pacific and western Caribbean, much of the illicit transport departs from Colombia and uses maritime means to reach northern Central America and southern Mexico, where a large amount of transport shifts to terrestrial routes. The Northern Triangle serves as a bottle-neck, for avoiding high-seas patrols and the more robust presence of U.S. and Mexican assets, as compared to Central American nations.

Why is this important from a U.S. perspective, and why should we dedicate a long-term strategic function supporting IDAD for this threat? The U.S. must address threats that threaten regional stability, as all aspects of the diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) construct are essentially at risk. In conjunction, if the U.S. does not address these threats, it allows for others (such as China and

Russia) to co-opt the opportunity and degrades efforts for the U.S. to establish any semblance of empirical partnership. “Since the Monroe Doctrine...the United States has considered Latin America part of its sphere of influence,” but “as the United States was being challenged by events in Asia and the Middle East, it withdrew its interest in Latin America even as radical ideological authoritarian regimes...began to consolidate in the region.”⁷ This trend can be altered by strategic U.S. action.

Efforts under CARSII and even within SOUTHCOM previously focused on single objectives and were short-term endeavors that did little to achieve a unified or cooperative approach, not just for the affected nations, but even between different U.S. agencies and missions. In theory, the “new strategy is based on the premise that prosperity, security, and governance” must function in a mutually supporting system.⁸ Instead of stove-piped programs that did not complement one another and a lack of communication among agencies that focused on their own areas of concern and even operated at times at cross purposes, there must be an overarching program that directs individual action toward a group goal. That goal must serve the interests of the U.S., Central America, and Mexico; must be sustainable and realistic; and should have an end state in which host nations essentially stand on their own as partners with the U.S., as opposed to simply beneficiaries. Both the efficiency and planning are even more important as the current administration looks to trim budgets for the engagement program. The objectives of prosperity, governance, and security are complementary, and each will fit squarely within the IDAD model, which can then be used as a framework for coordination.

Joint Publication 3-22 defines FID as the “participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in...action programs taken by another government...to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness,

insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to their security.”⁹ This accurately describes the need for a strategic program for the Northern Triangle and directs the military components of a such a joint program, together with civilian departments and agencies, to work toward building host-nation capacity. The IDAD Strategy Model can essentially be used as the playbook to implement the objectives of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. As further noted in the joint publication, the IDAD program will be geared toward “building viable political, economic, military, and social institutions” with an overall goal “to prevent an insurgency or other forms of lawlessness or subversion.”¹⁰

Strategic Elements and Partnerships

Why is a unique strategy needed for the land-based transportation sector of the illicit contraband system in the hemisphere so important? The countermeasures employed in the maritime arena face difficulties, such as the need for intelligence-directed targeting and an enormous swath of area to patrol, but also derive benefit from the established procedures and mechanisms associated with the high-seas, international territory, bi-lateral agreements, and the non-sovereign nature of the open ocean. Conversely, national territory, in this case represented by the nations of the Northern Triangle and southern Mexico, presents a different hurdle in terms of actively and effectively blocking smuggling routes and efficiently interdicting illicit traffic. To have a measure of success, there is a need for cooperation and coordination across national boundaries and an overarching mechanism to oversee and assist such a process.

The U.S. must also define the problem in realistic terms and not hamstring its own efforts by placing academic debate over practical recognition, which too often hinders the start of any process. As noted by SOUTHCOM, “transregional and transnational threat

networks...carve out geographical areas of impunity in which they can operate without fear of law enforcement interference,” and these networks “have the ability to destabilize societies.”¹¹ Central America should treat these violent movements, which essentially control territory under norms associated with insurgency, with means associated to counter such movements, instead of the simply applying strict, law-enforcement measures. Stability must be established with an approach that uses force (jointly employed military and police units) to provide breathing space for the government to exert empirical and not simply juridical controls. The model most applicable for this situation is FID doctrine. In such a construct, deploying police with military support for stabilization can allow the government to enter non-permissive areas to restore citizen confidence. The transnational adversaries are well-coordinated and equipped, and security forces in the region “generally lack the personnel, equipment, and training necessary to respond to these threats.”¹² This is where U.S. aid to support host nation internal defense can fill the void.

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Central American nations need a joint, supportive capacity between the military and police forces. Police forces must be established in a leadership role for internal security operations but must also be substantially assisted by military resources. In many ways, the model used under JIATF-South can be used as a template for cooperative engagement, blending the support of military forces toward law enforcement aims. The added component within the engagement strategy is the broader reach of establishing stability to promote security across the board.

Some will argue that any counterinsurgency model does not have a place in combatting these threats. This is where academic debate does not mesh with on-the-ground reality, where practicality and common sense should outweigh the classroom. As noted by Latin American security experts John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, “these entities are initially non-politicized in a Maoist or traditional insurgent sense is irrelevant; rather, it is the outcome of their striving for impunity of action that results in their *de facto* politicization as bandit chieftains and localized warlords.”¹³

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Can Central America be a fruitful partner or is the U.S. wasting time and resources by merging a proven strategy model in IDAD with the engagement objectives? According to the current SOUTHCOM leadership, “Central American partners are increasingly capable, playing a role in nearly 50 percent of JIATF-South’s maritime interdiction operations,” demonstrating an ability for improvement and growth when properly supported.¹⁴ What about Mexico? Concerns about sovereignty have limited the scope and nature of U.S. military participation in that nation; however, an increase under an advisory capacity for cross-border operations may be feasible and allow for greater coordination. This is a lynchpin, as Mexico can essentially work alongside the U.S. in supporting and conducting FID in Central America as well as bringing capable forces to the table. Another key element that previously has been ignored or given shallow lip-service is the need for dedicated diplomatic strategic engagement as a foundation to build and interact with the FID forces.

FID efforts are often and rightfully

associated with counterinsurgency. However, to dissuade or co-opt those who remain perched on the ideal that such efforts do not fit the efforts to disrupt and defeat Western Hemisphere transnational networks, a reminder is offered that FID is also directed at “other threats to... internal stability, such as civil disorder, illicit drug trafficking, and terrorism” that “may, in fact, predominate in the future as traditional power centers shift.”¹⁵ David Maxwell argues that “FID may be a strategic option for policy makers to consider when the U.S. is faced with non-existential threats” that still affect U.S. interests and require a commitment of U.S. government resources to “come to the aid of a friend, partner or ally who may be faced with an existential threat.”¹⁶ Hence, whether one accepts or rejects a counterinsurgency posture in the academic sense, the point is moot at the operational level, as the FID tools and IDAD model are geared toward the actual threat, not rigidly defined through debatable parameters. FID efforts under the IDAD model will require a fully integrated approach. By its nature, such a program will “integrate security force and civilian actions into a coherent, comprehensive effort” to “provide a level of internal security that permits and supports growth through balanced development.”¹⁷

The Right Tools for the Job

To accomplish the tasks set out in the engagement strategy using an IDAD model, the correct resources must be applied to maximize the benefit of training, assistance, and development objectives. It is highly unlikely that U.S. forces will receive increased funding or support, therefore it is even more critical to bring the most efficient tools to the program. The knee jerk reaction may be heavy emphasis on Special Forces personnel, but this would be a mistake. While their expertise and high-end capacity is needed, it should be used in conjunction with other forces more fitting for specific mission sets.

David Maxwell notes that many senior leaders, internal and external to the military, have often mistakenly assumed all unconventional skill sets rest only with Special Forces; hence, there has been a self-imposed limitation on using these strategies. The “pre-9/11 FID doctrine expressly stated that **all** services were to provide trained and ready forces to conduct FID,” but this has been largely ignored across other services and branches, as well as by civilian leadership.¹⁸ This recognition is slowly coming to light and can be seen in the current stand-up of the U.S. Army’s Security Force Assistance Brigades.

Therefore, a mixture of forces must support a broad regional strategy in Central America. These forces will include special operations personnel as well as National Guard units that can leverage professional relationships from the State Partnership Program to cooperate in areas such as leadership, maintenance, and border security; the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) that can easily mesh with host-nation units more in tune with USCG missions and operations than with the U.S. Navy; civilian law enforcement personnel, who can objectively assist with operations and enforcement actions, as well as help host nation forces negotiate the law enforcement and military relationships; and conventional units adept at civil-military operations and military information support operations.

All factors of the strategy must be coordinated with overarching regional buy-in, as “regional institutions are...best seen as vehicles for coping with a security predicament, for alleviating state weakness in a competitive international environment.”¹⁹ Hence, bringing in Mexican forces, such as the Fuerza de Infanteria de Marina (marines), who are highly experienced in hybrid operations and internal security, as well as allowing and encouraging participation from OAS, will give the engagement strategy a more fraternal element. As described by Stephen Webber, “Mexican naval forces have become leaders in multidimensional security,” as they

are frequently and effectively “employed...in response to a myriad of threats that extend far beyond kinetic action.”²⁰ The U.S. can leverage such capacity and experience, both as a partner for action and as a demonstrative indication of U.S. willingness to cooperate with Latin American nations.

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One concern in many nations and one with which the U.S. struggles is the use of the military for internal security. Due to the nature of the violence in the Northern Triangle and its co-opting of insurgency-like characteristics, “Central American governments have increasingly turned to their militaries to provide public security,” and while working hard to establish civilian control over such forces, “they have made much less progress in defining proper military-police roles and relationships.”²¹ This is an area which is critical for IDAD, but for which the toolset of National Guard and USCG personnel are arguably more capable than conventional or special forces, because of the unique background each has with exactly this issue.

The National Guard “expands the capacity of the civilian instruments of government at the state and local level” and “this civil-military partnership” can be leveraged to better assist host-nation forces.²² The value of such engagement is already recognized by the current SOUTHCOM command. With regards to the USCG, Joint Publication 3-22 notes that “a common constabulary and multi-mission nature promotes instant understanding and interoperability and makes USCG a valued partner for many naval and maritime forces.”²³ Therefore, a mixed bag of U.S. forces, paired with Mexican military personnel and civilian assistance from OAS and partnering Latin

American nations will need to work alongside security forces of the three Central American nations in a coordinated regional effort. But how should such a motley group of personnel be organized in a format with realistic expectations for success?

Instead of reinventing the wheel, the U.S. should turn to effective and established networks that can be leveraged and augmented and already operate under SOUTHCOM direction. JIATF-South combines U.S. military services and civilian agencies with partner nations to both address illicit trafficking and the transnational networks used for such operations. And while JIATF-South is a SOUTHCOM unit, it regularly coordinates with NORTHCOM for operations in southern Mexico and could be given permission for oversight in that area of operations. In this model, JIATF-South already has an extensive and functional network for coordinated operations and oversight. Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) in Honduras, already adept at coordinating and supporting Latin American forces, could be used as the forward staging area for U.S. personnel working within the Northern Triangle region. In addition, it could also be possible to solicit support from the training and advisory presence maintained by the UK in Belize, based around the British Army Training Support Unit Belize (BATSUB), which could be used by joint forces as a neutral and inclusive training site for deployment preparations and joint operational training. These elements can provide oversight, control, and support to maximize cooperative efforts.

Conclusion

The U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America recognizes the importance of the Northern Triangle to U.S. interests and acknowledges the need for supporting efforts to the region. It defines actionable areas, to include security, but stops short of identifying how to take corrective action. In addition, the emphasis in the security arena is geared more toward status quo versus making changes. To move forward, these areas should be addressed.

The IDAD Security Model sets forth a framework to mobilize support for host nation governance, provide increased security and stability, neutralize security threats, and develop host-nation capability. Application of such a framework on a regional scale in the Northern Triangle and Southern Mexico will create more self-sufficient states that can deter and counteract bad actors in the region and effectively create a better buffer to criminal and transnational intrusion to the south of the U.S. The existing model can be used for adapting the current strategy and moving beyond status quo strategy. Greater focus is needed on partnership in the hemisphere with a fraternal U.S. relationship as opposed to simply doling out resources. The current strategy's security profile should be expanded to include stability and should be given more depth to recognize these issues are not simply law enforcement but encompass a range of issues that require military cooperation as well.

The nations of Northern Triangle each require a tailored FID approach based on accomplishing the goals of the IDAD model. Each requires advisory and operational support from elements of the U.S. military, focused toward both defense and proactive enforcement measures, as well as support from partners engaged in countering transnational criminal elements. These units must be tailored to meet needs locally, which requires employing forces in a constabulary fashion, such as the U.S. Coast Guard and law-enforcement-centric elements of the National Guard State Partnership Program; traditional FID forces, such as special operations personnel for advisory missions; a dedicated local partner in the form of Mexican military advisory personnel; and focused engagement through U.S. embassy partner agencies.

These efforts cannot stand alone in each country, or the regional concept fails. These tailored

elements must work in a joint fashion. Coordination at diplomatic levels can occur with engagement between OAS, embassy partnerships, and SOUTHCOM leadership. Coordination at the operational and tactical levels, with units working across borders and coordinating actions, can be managed through mechanisms currently employed by JITAF-South.

The transnational networks operating in this area of concern “co-opt or influence local power structures at the local and national levels” and have “significantly undermined governance and the rule of law” that, in turn, presents “multiple, significant, and sustained threats to the security of the United States.”²⁴ The U.S. cannot simply hope that host nations will solve these issues independently, nor can it operate in a vacuum and hope to correct the problem unilaterally. The result of such analysis is that “a comprehensive strategy that addresses economic and governance concerns in addition to security challenges is needed to improve conditions in Central America.”²⁵ This is the **only** way such improvement can occur.

The U.S Strategy for Engagement in Central America is the result of improvements upon previous such endeavors. However, it stops short of providing a mechanism for accomplishing regional stability goals. This mechanism exists in the employment of FID Doctrine to implement host-nation internal defense and development. Following this existing doctrine and using a blend of existing resources with a regional mindset and defined command and control can push efforts to a favorable conclusion, greater regional stability that benefits the U.S. and the hemisphere. **IAJ**

NOTES

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