By Juan Camilo Castillo

A new type of insurgency

Since the end of the Cold War, the notions of low intensity conflicts, armed non-state actors and unconventional warfare have gained a significant attention from the media, policy-makers and the academic world alike. In the post 9/11 strategic environment, these concepts have gained an overarching significance when thinking about international security and stability, especially, when placed in the context of ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Certainly, when we revise the idea of an insurgency carrying out an active campaign where guerrilla tactics and terrorism are the tools of choice, it is difficult to separate the notion of violence as a core vehicle for political outcomes. As noted by journalist Robert Taber (in reference to Clausewitz's famous line) "guerrilla warfare" becomes politics through other means. Therefore, normally speaking an insurgency has always been associated with a political cause. For example, the Taliban and Al-Qaida in Iraq want to set up Islamist emirates in their areas of operations, the Tamil Tigers seek the creation of a Tamil Homeland, Shining Path in Peru and FARC in Colombia seek to establish a Maoist and Communist regimes respectively, and so the list goes on.

However, in the last twenty years a new type of insurgency has emerged not driven by the desire to advance political outcomes but instead by economic interests. Such type of non-state actors normally start in the form of organized crime syndicates, yet due to the extremely profitable illicit activity in which they are engaged they are able to "purchase" significant offensive capabilities. The prime examples of such groups were the infamous Medellin and Cali cartels in Colombia.

Indeed, these groups may have started as organisations whose main purpose was to control the illegal production and exportation of cocaine, something that could be considered apolitical, criminal and rather economically driven. Nevertheless, as the business became more profitable and opposition from the government, left-wing guerrillas and similar organisations grew, the cartels began to acquire military grade armaments. Shockingly, between the end of the 1980s and 1990s these organisations were able to create light infantry formations to protect their illicit crops, urban death squads (known as sicarios), and even hired mercenaries from Israel and the United Kingdom whose main purpose was to provide further technical and tactical training to the cartels' forces.

By the same token, the Colombian cartels were able to gain significant local popular support by engaging in non-kinetic activities. For example, the Medellin Cartel became famous for building schools, infrastructure and providing public goods in the city's low-income neighbourhoods. Ultimately, this type of actions somewhat reflect the principles set up by Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung, were they argued that the key behind waging successful unconventional wars rests on the ability of the insurgency to influence popular

support. Nonetheless, at their height, the Colombian Cartels caused thousands of deaths, which included government officials, members of the Colombian security forces, and civilians alike.

Also, it is important to note that while these groups started as economically driven actors, they evolved into a more coercive entity that sought to weaken and influence the state in which they operated. Therefore, as any other insurgency they sought political outcomes as well. Paradoxically, some classic insurgencies have followed a reverse path. They start as politically driven entities but with time they may engage in criminal activities in order to finance their cause (i.e. FARC and the cocaine trade, IRA and organized crime or the Taliban and the heroin trade.)

Criminal Insurgencies in the new century

The end of the Colombian cartels has not necessarily marked the culmination of "criminal" insurgencies as a peculiar security threat of the post-Cold War era. Instead, it can be seen as the beginning of a phenomenon that has been replicated in other regions. Currently, one of the most conspicuous cases is Mexico, where the drug cartels have launched one of the bloodiest insurgent campaigns ever witnessed in the Western Hemisphere. Between 2006 and 2010 it is estimated that 22,743 people have died as a direct consequence of the cartels' orchestrated violence. Initially, these groups started as the Colombian syndicates' subsidiaries responsible for transferring narcotics across the US border. In spite of this, the end of the major Colombian organisations left a management vacuum, which the rising Mexican groups were able to seize quickly. Currently, it is believed that 90% of the cocaine that makes its way into North America is smuggled through Mexico's borders and territorial waters.

Similarly to their Colombian counterparts the Mexican cartels have focused on acquiring military grade capabilities that are used to attack both competing cartels and the Mexican government. For instance, the Gulf Cartel was able to recruit members from the Mexican Special Forces (Special Air Mobile Group), Guatemalan Special Forces (Kabiles) and local police forces in order to create its infamous paramilitary wing Los Zetas. This group of highly trained and highly motivated forces has been responsible for attacks against government officials, competing cartels' members and both personnel and installations of the Mexican Federal Police and Armed forces. Furthermore, due to the expertise possessed by this group they have been able to increase in numbers by transforming petty criminals into trained troops under their organisation. Subsequently, the response of the other Mexican cartels has been to create their own paramilitary wings such as in the case of Los Pelones, Los Negros and Las Fuerzas Especiales de Arturo. In most cases, these Paramilitary wings have become independent organisations in their own right, and in some cases, clashed with their former patrons.

Apart from elite military training, these Mexican "criminal" insurgencies have been able to acquire a significant amount of military hardware that is even uncommon among other armed non-state actors. Apart from a large variety of small arms, these groups have procured weapon systems such as anti-materiel missile launchers, anti-air guns, grenade launchers, complete sets of Kevlar body armour and high tech surveillance and communications equipment.

Alarmingly, these acquisitions have closed the capability gap between the "criminal" insurgencies and the state security forces.

At the same time, the paramilitary wings of the cartels have also developed their own kind of non-kinetic operations. For starters, the cartels have been quite successful in infiltrating and/or co-opting the governments at a municipal and state level. For instance, Los Zetas were under direct control of the New Laredo police force, which was used in an attack against members of the Mexican Federal Police. Similarly, the Sinaloa Cartel has used municipal police members in Acapulco to conduct hits against members of the Gulf Cartel and the Mexican Army.

Also the cartels' paramilitary wings have been engaged in a very "graphic" propaganda war in which captured members of rival syndicates are forced to perform "confessions" of crimes committed against the civilian population before they are executed in front of a camera. Appallingly, these armed groups have copied Iraqi insurgents by taping gruesome executions that are later posted on websites created for that sole purpose. Indeed, the Mexican "criminal" insurgencies have not been shy of using blogs, Youtube, online forums and websites as PSYOPS instruments to embody themselves as the sole authority in their respective area of operations.

The global future of "criminal" insurgencies

While the most salient cases of "criminal" insurgencies have occurred inLatin America, it does not necessarily mean that other regions are not prone to the emergence of similar groups. For instance, after Iran launched an aggressive counter-narcotic campaign that blocked the traditional "
Mediterranean Route

" toEurope in the late 90s, the Central Asian republics have become one of the most significant heroin transit regions in the World. As the heroin trade is actually quite decentralized it creates a window of opportunity for cartel-type actors to emerge in the region.

Initially, the collapse of communism saw the rise of small organised crime syndicates throughout the former Soviet republics. Simultaneously, the ongoing political change also brought the emergence of ethnically/religiously oriented armed non-state actors in the region generating instability throughout the Eurasian plateau. However, in the last decade both types of actors have begun to cooperate and in some cases have even converged. This situation has opened the door for the emergence of "criminal"-insurgencies.

As a case in point, it is well known that groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have special arrangements with local organized crime groups in order to move narcotics from Afghanistan into theRussian Federation. Nevertheless, since the heroin flow has become more significant throughout the region, the crime syndicates have become more economically empowered. Consequently, this has allowed the criminal syndicates to "purchase" offensive capabilities by co-opting members of the insurgent groups present in the region. Unsurprisingly, events such as the 1999 and 2000 Dushanbe bombings inTajikistan, clearly demonstrate that many of these groups have taken the first steps in becoming criminal insurgencies.

Similarly, West Africa has become a pivotal cocaine transit region into Europe, and once again, it shares similar symptoms of political instability with Latin America andCentral Asia. Indeed, many analysts have gone as far as to call Guinea Bissau the first "real narco-state" due to the economic dependency that the West African nation has with the narcotics trade. Like the Mexican cartels, the Bissau-Guinean criminal gangs have been able to accumulate extensive economic power by acting as brokers between the source of the narcotics and the intended market; however, their use of violence has been almost none in comparison to their Latin-American counterparts.

Nonetheless, there are fears that elements from the national armed forces are becoming involved in the cocaine trade, and consequently, are willing to use widespread violence in order to create a narcotics traffic monopoly. Currently, the army is a major source of political instability in Guinea-Bissau, and if it is able to consolidate itself as the sole regional player in the cocaine traffic it will become in a powerful criminal entity. The presence of such actor would be detrimental for regional instability as it could spread its operations to neighbouring countries such as Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Given that these states have a history of fragile governance and intra-state violence the presence of a well-organised "criminal" insurgency can only be classified as disastrous for West African peace and security.

In the end, it is difficult to assess where and when these groups will emerge. Yet given the presence of failing states, the rise of transnational organised crime and spread of international violence it is quite likely that criminal insurgencies will be present in the 21st century.

1 comments:

John P. Sullivan said... , 04 July 2009 at
http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/07/thirdgeneration-gangs-and-crim/