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Vigilantism in Mexico: A New Phase in Mexico's Security Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

The violent struggle between rival Mexican drug cartels and other criminal groups has left tens of thousands dead and towns across Mexico paralyzed with fear. With overwhelmed police forces relatively powerless to control drug-related murders and kidnappings, a growing number of vigilante organizations, or self-defense groups, aim to restore order—but now even they are fighting, and killing, among themselves.

The rise of these vigilantes is yet another test for the Mexican government. Will people continue to take security matters into their own hands? How long will they operate as independent security units?

In Michoacán, what started as a cooperative agreement between self-defense groups and the federal government has become a tug-of-war over which group will ultimately provide security in Western Mexico. In one incident, police in March 2014 found two charred bodies—believed to be members of a self-defense group—in the back of a pickup truck. Days later, Mexican federal police arrested Hipólito Mora, leader of a prominent, rival self-defense group.¹ Internecine fighting among the vigilante groups only means trouble for their future—and the government that deputized them as armed, rural defense forces.

THE RISE OF SELF-DEFENSE FORCES

President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December 2012. He quickly announced plans to reduce drug-related crime and general violence,² but aside from the 2014 arrest of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and other kingpins, meaningful reductions of crime and violence remain elusive. National polls show that perceptions of insecurity are higher today than they were in 2013.³ The administration's failure to improve citizen safety has led to the rise of vigilante groups determined to defend their families and towns.

In the Western Mexico state of Michoacán, for example, the drug-trafficking Sinaloa Cartel has fought a protracted battle against the local criminal cartel known as the Knights Templar to retain control of Michoacán's lucrative maritime ports. Weary of the violence, residents took up arms to form self-defense groups focused on the removal of the Knights Templar—which had also been extorting protection payments, kidnapping for ransom, or taking over the property of local residents.

The self-defense groups in Michoacán and elsewhere in Mexico have performed most of the public safety functions usually associated with the police, including the establishment of checkpoints, arrests, the staging of perfunctory “trials,” the use of



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corporal punishment, and, in some cases, enforcing the penalty of forced labor by criminal suspects held in makeshift jails.

LEGITIMATE AND ILLEGITIMATE SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS

Interviews with public safety officials⁴ in Guerrero State and Mexico City and public media reports reveal the existence of three types of self-defense-styled groups in Mexico. The first appears to consist of legitimate, grassroots self-defense groups. The other two types operate under the guise of grassroots self-defense groups to conceal other, less civic-minded motives.

Independent, grassroots self-defense groups are primarily composed of frustrated citizens who have taken up arms to protect their villages, crops, and personal and community assets from criminal organizations. These groups focus on the prevention and punishment of local crimes such as extortion, kidnapping, theft, and rape. Their formation may have had the unintended positive consequence of forcing Mexico's leaders to act.

Criminal and drug-trafficking organizations operating as self-defense groups are well-armed, outfitted with automatic weapons, long rifles, body armor, and other defensive equipment. Criminal organizations are the only logical source of such sophisticated weaponry. In some towns, locals have denounced these groups as illegitimate self-defense forces.⁵

Insurgent organizations like the "Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias-Liberación del Pueblo" (FAR-LP) effectively operate as self-defense groups. For example, the FAR-LP—unhappy with structural reforms in Mexico—announced its intention to attack PEMEX facilities if energy reforms went through.⁶ It is not known, but is reasonable to expect, that the FAR-LP will become a self-defense group, but with a markedly different purpose—a deduction based on FAR-LP manifestos that allege oppression and exploitation of the masses through government corruption and

the need to "defend" national resources or the assets of the people.

COMPLICATED SCENARIOS

Although it is possible to outline three distinct types of self-defense groups, informal structures and overlapping interests leave room for cooperation among all three. Such alliances could be motivated by a common desire to challenge the government. Alternatively, any two groups could clash and create a more complicated scenario. This is even more plausible because there is some evidence that factions of the 20,000-person strong legitimate self-defense groups have been infiltrated by the group they want to eradicate, the Knights Templar. This theory is further reinforced by the fact that Michoacán landowners have complained that self-defense groups have expropriated lands and orchards originally taken from them by the Knights Templar.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Peña Nieto administration has allowed some self-defense groups to operate within a loose government charter. Some groups in Michoacán have been deputized, operating either independently or alongside government forces. This recognition does not exempt the government from responsibility for abuses or violations of law committed by the vigilantes, either as independent citizens under the loose supervision of government forces or as criminals operating under the false flag of a self-defense group. Thus, the federal government has tried to step in and perform its public safety functions; however, it may not fully understand the complex web of local relationships, alliances, and potential conflicts.

Over time, self-defense groups may establish themselves as permanent citizen-soldier forces, operating independently of the federal government. Already some groups in Michoacán are resisting government authority, refusing to disband.⁷ If this were to occur on a larger scale, dissolution would be

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more difficult as self-defense groups become part of the fabric of rural society.

For the federal government, the best case scenario is that self-defense groups lose momentum, especially if federal police and military forces grow in number and establish a more permanent presence in violence-prone areas. The eventual rise of a planned federal paramilitary *gendarmería* may someday supplant army and navy troops in the field—and, theoretically, self-defense groups—but the evolution of this new force appears to have stalled and may not be as forthcoming as initially advertised.⁸

DOMESTIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The failure of the government in Michoacán⁹ points to a disturbing trend: the inability of states and even the federal government to perform its functions, particularly the provision of public safety. There are several reasons for this. Corruption and intimidation have led to the calcification of public safety efforts. Police forces are overwhelmed by crime and relatively powerless to control, much less reduce, criminality. State governments are paralyzed by a body politic that dictates adherence to the national mantra that all is well—that the country is not on fire while the house is burning. Additionally, Mexico lacks the necessary coordination between federal, state, and local governments for a coherent security strategy.¹⁰

The state-federal failure is highlighted by the frequent use of the military to perform police functions normally conducted by municipal and state police departments—as well as the inability of the federal government to recruit, train, equip, and field the hybrid paramilitary *gendarmería* in the strength of numbers required to replace military forces and remove them from domestic policing roles.

If self-defense groups operate with well-established goals and objectives and are successfully incorporated into a thoughtful public safety bureaucracy, a new form of

self-policing may emerge in Mexico. In the interim, self-defense groups are writing the newest chapter of Mexico's security strategy—a self-help playbook dictated by the masses and imposed on a perplexed and ineffective government.

Conversely, the perpetuation of self-defense groups without command, control, and coordination could create a lawless society in certain regions of Mexico. The continued operation of self-defense groups without formal training and government supervision may also spur human rights violations and implicate the federal government in such crimes.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A pointed example of the symbiosis between the United States and Mexico is the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, which the Mexican Navy wrested away from criminal gangs in November 2013.¹¹ The port is an essential component of the China-North America supply chain. Interruptions could create a domino effect on business operations stretching from North America to the region's broader trade networks.

In the other direction, iron ore, zinc, and other minerals are exported from Mexico to China and elsewhere in Asia via the port of Lázaro Cárdenas. Crime is therefore both an internal and external threat; it affects multinational corporations that contribute to Mexico's economic success. In addition to obstructing trade, events in Michoacán could have a negative effect on intermodal business jobs in Mexico. Conversely, when public safety is assured and trade is fluid, jobs increase in Mexico, fewer undocumented migrants seek employment in the United States, and less stress is placed on social services and border infrastructure in both countries.

CONCLUSION

Insecurity in Mexico affects prosperity in North America. The three signatories of

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The United States must consider a regional security strategy that includes helping Mexico secure its critical ports and supply chains against disruption by criminal elements.

the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) must work together on areas of common interest to ensure free and secure regional trade. Events in Michoacán and the response of Mexico's leaders to self-defense groups can arguably become a national security issue for the United States and an economic issue for the NAFTA region. The United States must consider a regional security strategy that includes helping Mexico secure its critical ports and supply chains against disruption by criminal elements.

The United States may also consider linking immigration reform with the development of substantive, well-defined public safety reforms by the Mexican government in key logistical areas like Michoacán, Guerrero, and Mexico's northern border states.

Self-defense groups have emerged as the purported remedy to insecurity in Michoacán and other states, highlighting the failure of the Mexican government to maintain good and lasting public order, as well as strengthen public safety and justice institutions. On any given day, it is difficult to determine whether criminals or the government has the upper hand. Members of citizen groups fending for themselves should be of serious concern to those responsible for the future of trade policy and economic integration in North America.

ENDNOTES

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