As I have lived, experienced, studied, and deployed to the Latin American region for decades, like many others, I continue to look for reasons to be optimistic about the region. The sad reality is that I often come short. The cycle of drug-related crime, violence, terrorism, corruption, and illegal immigration keeps the region mired in an inescapable dilemma of countries using scarce resources to make life better for people everywhere or maintain armies they cannot afford. TOC continues to be the highest threat in our hemisphere. The tendency has been to look at this criminal activity as a United States problem on one end and as a production problem on the other, with Colombia and Peru taking turns at the number one spot as the top cocaine producer in the world.

First, we need to review the current regional environment. In spite of decades of suffering through the effects of drug cartel activity and becoming the biggest consumer of illicit drugs, I believe that in the United States we don’t view this as big a problem as it should be. It is understandable that al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and now ISIS dominate the news. However, we have diminished our attention to the transnational crime problem at our own peril. In his most recent testimony to the U.S. Congress, Marine Corps General John Kelly, United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)
commander, said the drug cartels are more efficient than FedEx. The analogy is right on the mark as the cartels operate as a business with organization, hierarchy, functional alignment, and competition that would rival any Fortune 500 company.

The evolution of a Colombian dominated drug trafficking operation to a Mexican one brought more money into the equation, increased violence, widespread corruption, and improved efficiency. In a move you would expect from a major corporation, Colombian cartels passed the responsibility for the movement of drugs from Honduras and Guatemala, through Mexico into the United States. The Colombian cartels formerly dominated the entire process but shrewdly recognized that even with reduced revenue, the lesser risk made this arrangement worthwhile. The Mexican cartels eagerly took that side of the business and became the dominant force, especially along the U.S.–Mexico border area.

According to a 2014 Rand Corporation research brief titled “How big is the U.S. Market for Illegal Drugs?” in spite of a 50 percent decline in cocaine use between 2006 and 2010, the drug business is at $100 billion annually. It must be noted that the decrease in cocaine use has been followed by an estimated 30 percent increase in marijuana use, a steep decline in methamphetamine use, and stable numbers in heroin consumption.² It is a business, and business is good for those living off the drug trade, especially in Mexico.

At one point, Mexican newspapers published articles announcing the death of the Sinaloa Cartel leader’s chief of security. Their crime boss, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman was behind bars and recently escaped again. Los Zetas’ top leader and others in the organization have also been arrested. Beyond the obvious importance and nature of these arrests, the real story is that if you read in the newspapers that the number three leader in a given drug cartel has been arrested, that means that there is a number two and a number four. It means there is an organization, orders are passed, and someone is in charge of warehousing, distribution, money laundering, smuggling through the U.S.–Mexico border and ultimately distribution inside the United States. Since 2009, Mexican authorities have captured or killed two-thirds of their most wanted drug traffickers with a substantial disruption of the flow of drugs. However, these groups have proven to be capable of regenerating leadership spots and running operations from jail. In a typical case of no decision without risk or action without reaction, the arrests brought unprecedented levels of violence. No good deed goes unpunished.
Violence follows transnational crime. The top 10 most violent cities in the world are in Latin America. This dubious distinction belongs to San Pedro Sula in Honduras (171.2 homicides per 100,000 residents); followed by Caracas, Venezuela; Acapulco, Mexico; Joao Pessoa, Brazil; Central District, Honduras; Maceio, Brazil; Valencia, Venezuela; Fortaleza, Brazil; Cali, Colombia; and Sao Luis, Brazil. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and widespread violence in Africa make this top 10 list hard to believe. Business Insider reports that one-third of global homicides occur in Latin America, even though only 8 percent of the world population lives in the region. For example, in El Salvador, in March 2015, 481 people were murdered—16 people per day—a 52 percent increase from the same period last year.

The question is: who is behind the violence? According to BBC News, most of the violence in Mexico is between rival gangs. The objective is control over territory and routes. The most notable are Los Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel. Los Zetas operate in over half of the country and with much more regional control; they have become the leaders in violence. Vigilante groups and government attempts to counter these organizations have also added to the level of violence. Violence becomes a language, and the message is that they run everything in their area and people who don’t comply must move, or worse yet, pay the consequences.

Corruption is a key factor in this cycle of drug-related crime, violence, terrorism, and illegal immigration. The collusion of drug cartels, local governments, federal government officials, and the powerful elite, and in some cases law enforcement agencies and armed forces, is well documented. Mexico’s President Peña Nieto said: “Today there is, without a doubt, a sensation of incredulity and distrust … there has been a loss of confidence and this has sown suspicion and doubt.” The World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index for 2014 placed Mexico 79 out of 99 in close proximity to Russia, Madagascar, China, and Egypt, in strength of rule of law, quality of governance, and criminal justice system. In Latin America it is only behind Guatemala, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Venezuela.

Mexican Armed Forces have taken a lead role in fighting criminal elements as law enforcement has fallen short of the mark. Vigilante groups have emerged in places where lack of government presence or inaction forced them to take the law into their hands. The recent disappearance in the state of Guerrero of 43 Mexican students, presumed dead, highlights this problem. In spite of an investigation that produced multiple arrests, confessions, sworn
testimonies, and expert reports, there hasn’t been closure on this heinous crime. Protests in the capital, Mexico City, demand answers in another scandal that has rocked the current government, undermines its credibility, and erodes confidence in the legal system. 7

Recently, the terrorism–drug trafficking nexus has been the subject of numerous articles and congressional testimony. We have known for some time that the same routes used to smuggle drugs can be used to transport just about anything. General Kelly has expressed concern about Iran’s presence in Latin America and about the radicalization of Muslims in the region. Hezbollah has expanded its operations in Latin America and into the United States and is generating millions of dollars through drug trafficking and money laundering, as discussed recently at a National Defense University conference. This link certainly includes Mexican drug cartels. In 2014 the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended 474 aliens from terrorist-linked countries attempting to enter the U.S. illegally. General Kelly also stated concerns about Islamic extremists traveling to Syria to participate in jihad, and last year 19 Trinidadian Muslims were detained in Venezuela for conducting training with high-powered weapons.

What are we doing in the region? According to the Congressional Research Service, for fiscal year (FY) 15, the $1.3 billion aid budget request for Latin America continues a downward trend. It is 10 percent lower than FY14 and 27 percent lower than FY12. The U.S. stated priorities of promoting economic and social opportunity, ensuring citizen security, strengthening effective institutions of democratic governance, and securing a clean energy future do not address the issue of TOC adequately. Therefore, any plans to fight drug cartels and criminal groups will certainly lack the resources needed. Historically, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have been priorities. Since 2008, Mexico, through the Merida initiative, has received aid to fight crime and drug trafficking. The FY15 budget included $137 million for this initiative, also showing a decrease in funding for much needed help to fight transnational crime, secure the border, and address other programs.

United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) engagement with Latin America has seen a significant decrease since the beginning of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. These operations took away SOF units that otherwise would carry the bulk of the engagement activities in Latin America, in support of SOUTHCOM. The Special Operations Command South saw its
pool of available resources go down to about a third of what it used to have. Under this paradigm, it became increasingly difficult to maintain enduring relationships with our partners in the region and in most cases reduced engagement activities to episodic events or having to move SOF units from one country to another within a deployment cycle. Regionally, countries like Colombia and Mexico are capable of providing assistance and expertise to their neighbors, but this is not yet working at its fullest potential.

As we look at these factors we must also consider the state of poverty in the region. According to the World Bank, one in five people in Latin America, around 130 million, live in poverty and have never known any other way to live. This means, by definition, people who live on less than $4.00 a day. Undeniably, poverty creates the conditions for corruption and crime, placing underserved populations in an inescapable cycle of despair. Lack of security and government services create a void that criminal groups rush to fill. Once these criminal elements replace the government they become the law. Examples are the favelas in Brazil. Gangs emerge from poor neighborhoods and in many places, primarily in Honduras and El Salvador, they have become the face of the drug traffic. However, this is not just a Central American problem. Beyond the notorious Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18, in Colombia’s 6 biggest cities—Medellin, Cali, Bucaramanga, Barranquilla, Cartagena, and Bogota—there are 500 street gangs. In Bogota alone there are 107.

What should we do? We must have a regional strategy that brings us all together to fight a common threat. The United States, Canada, and Mexico have to look at transnational crime as a regional problem. It is time, again, to look at this as a defense in depth. The strategic end state could be a Latin American region capable of disrupting the flow of illegal trafficking of all kinds, with a network of partner nations sharing information and intelligence, establishing a defense in depth from production to distribution.

We must understand that this is an enterprise, albeit criminal, and approach it as such. A coordinated, comprehensive plan should focus on the entire flow: production, movement, storage, smuggling, distribution, overseas network, and money laundering. Those who disregard these efforts fail to realize that we have never had the proper resources available to find out how well this might work. This whole-of-government, regional approach will work if we did some of the following as a minimum:
SOF Role in Combating Transnational Organized Crime

**U.S. Defense Department and Partner Nation Ministries**

1. Invest to train, equip, follow-up, and then do it again.

2. Work together and assist with planning efforts and strategy development.

3. Build the regional network. Bilateral relations with the U.S. are good but not enough.

4. Improve coordination and communication among neighboring nations. Who do you call to pass intelligence?

5. Review and agree on how and where to do interdiction operations, especially in the source zones.

**U.S. State Department and Partner Nation Ministries**

1. Encourage, promote, and facilitate investment in Latin America.

2. Remove trade barriers and establish commerce and technological cooperation zones.

3. Spend money in Latin America—everyone will benefit from this.

4. Review and implement flexible authorities with resources to match so it doesn’t take an inordinate amount of time to execute projects or purchase needed equipment.

**U.S. Law Enforcement Agencies and Partner Nation Ministries**

1. Develop strong, mutually supportive agreements with SOF and other military units capable of supporting interdiction operations.

2. Resource law enforcement agencies’ mission at embassies adequately with the required skills.

3. Embed with partner nation agencies regionally.

**The North American Region**

1. Focus on Central and South America and the Caribbean because our collective future depends on it.
2. If we do the above then securing the borders would be easier.

**The Western Hemisphere**

1. Set aside differences, concentrate on regional goals, and focus on the common threats.

These extreme circumstances place all of us in a position of having to do something about transnational crime, its causes, actors, and factors. No country can do it alone, as it is not a problem that belongs to any country in particular. We have much to do and it must start by seeking ways to work together. If we cannot effectively work together, the criminal cycle that ties together drug traffic, terrorism, corruption, money laundering, and violence will remain a threat to our way of life, regional stability, and ultimately safety in our streets and neighborhoods everywhere.

**Endnotes**

1. This chapter is based on remarks given at the “SOF Role in Combatting Transnational Organized Crime” Symposium, 8-9 April 2015.


