

Forum: Security Council

Issue: Addressing the Threats Posed by Drug Cartels to Regional Stability and Security in Latin America

Name: Gerald Kang

Position: Head Chair of the Security Council

Introduction:

The pervasive influence of drug cartels in Latin America has emerged as a major issue to its regional stability and security. Activities by these drug cartels range from money laundering, corruption and violence to human trafficking, posing a significant threat to the safety of the region. The impacts of these activities destabilise governments, undermine the trust in the justice system and police and perpetuate cycles of poverty and violence, contributing to an alarming crisis that calls for comprehensive and coordinated international responses. However, before efforts for regional and international cooperation are made to combat the drug cartels, it is essential to understand the root causes and the scale of the danger that these drug cartels pose to not only Latin America but to the global community.

The repercussions of the drug cartels and their activities have never been more burdening to the public, as noted by the rise in public insecurity and social instability in Latin America, due to the drug cartels deeply entrenching themselves in local communities. For instance, the International Crisis Group states that around a third of global homicides occur in Latin America, of which many can be attributed to organised crime. Furthermore, the pervasive violence and corruption associated with such criminal organisations have severe economic consequences, deterring foreign investment and tourism, causing the proliferation of the black market, diversion and distortion of the market, and more, thus impeding economic growth.

Ultimately, addressing these extensive consequences of the drug cartels is vital for fostering a secure and stable environment in Latin America. Thus, when creating and drafting resolutions, delegates should be mindful of the intricate nature of the issue, identifying the causes and coming up with creative solutions to ensure

long-term economic stability, social justice and effective governance whilst simultaneously dismantling the power structures of the drug cartels.

Definition of Key Terms:

- 1. Drug Cartels:** Drug cartels are criminal organisations that engage in the manufacturing, trafficking, and selling of illicit substances. They frequently dominate large sections of the illegal drug market and resort to violence to uphold their authority and safeguard their activities.
- 2. Narco States:** The term "narco-state," short for "narcotics state," refers to a country where drug cartels have significantly infiltrated and influenced key institutions such as the government or military. In these states, drug cartels have substantial control over both government functions and the daily lives of citizens.
- 3. Narco-terrorism:** Narco-terrorism refers to situations where criminal organisations such as drug cartels use violence to intimidate and/or coerce civilians or the government for power. These narco-terrorists exercise extreme violence, including homicide, kidnappings, and mass killings, to create terror and therefore exert control.
- 4. Transnational Crime:** Transnational crime involves criminal activities that surpass national borders and entail criminal networks or operations which span across different countries. International collaboration is often necessary to effectively tackle these crimes as they often transcend national borders.
- 5. Balloon Effect:** This effect occurs when attempts to decrease drug production or trafficking in one location result in a rise in drug production or trafficking in a different location. This could happen because of changes in drug routes or production locations.
- 6. War on Drugs:** The War on Drugs consists of strategies and measures started by the United States in 1971 with the goal of diminishing the manufacturing, circulation, and use of illegal drugs. This led to similar global campaigns, which frequently involve using law enforcement tactics, military actions, and collaboration with other countries.

- 7. Cocaine:** Cocaine is a potent stimulant drug made from the coca plant, mainly manufactured in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. It is one of the major drugs trafficked from Latin America to global markets.

Background Information

Historical context of drug cartel activities in Latin America

The initial roots of drug cartel activities in Latin America can be traced back to the early 20th century. Initially, the focus of the drug cartels was on the production and distribution of opium and marijuana. However, as the global landscape began to shift in the mid-20th century, there was a growing demand for a new drug called cocaine.

By the 1970s to 1980s, cocaine production and distribution had become the main source of income and the primary activity of drug cartels. From this situation, Colombia emerged as the centre of cocaine production, with the establishment of powerful cartels like the Medellín and Cali cartels. These organisations exerted significant influence over the local and global drug markets, utilising violence, corruption and sophisticated smuggling techniques to maintain their operations.

The power of the Colombian drug cartels began to be threatened, with the U.S. government's War on Drugs being initiated by President Nixon in 1971, where the U.S. focused their drug enforcement efforts on dismantling Colombian cartels through programs such as "Plan Colombia". Their continuous effort eventually led to the toppling of the aforementioned Medellín and Cali cartels, but this only gave rise to the "balloon effect", where these Colombian drug manufacturers turned their attention to Mexico, where enforcement policies were almost non-existent.

In the 1990s, three major cartels emerged in Mexico: Gulf, Sinaloa and Juarez. The drastic increase in demand for drugs (primarily marijuana and cocaine) allowed these cartels to gain huge profits from their business, with estimates that the Sinaloa Cartel generates revenue of approximately USD \$3 billion each year. With the drug market flourishing, drug cartels were able to further consolidate their power within the region through financial and political means whilst also maintaining a fearful presence in the region by hiring a private army or being heavily armed with military-grade weapons.

Towards the 2000s, many governments started their efforts to address the various socioeconomic issues caused by the drug cartels, but to no avail. The diversification of the drug cartels' criminal activities beyond drug production and trafficking to arms smuggling, kidnapping, money laundering and more only increased their economic power and social influence, making them formidable adversaries for governments and law enforcement agencies.

The ongoing battle between rival cartels and between cartels and government forces resulted in significant loss of life and social instability in many Latin American countries. However, in recent years, the growing global recognition of the need to dismantle these drug cartels led these Latin American countries to share the same sentiment, with efforts shifting to transnational cooperation to tackle these often transnational drug cartels. However, it must be noted that challenges remain substantial as these drug cartels continue to adapt and find new ways to circumvent the law and sustain their operations.

Factors/Causes that led to the thriving of the drug cartels

There are many factors, all intertwined, that led to the rapid growth and thriving of the drug cartels in Latin America. Below are some key factors that have contributed most significantly to the issue.

Geographical location

Latin America's geographical proximity to major drug-consuming markets, namely the United States, makes it a suitable strategic transit hub for drug trafficking. This led to Latin America becoming the home to three of the largest cocaine-producing countries in the world: Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. Furthermore, the extensive global network has allowed the drug cartels to extend their influence to Europe. The European Police Organisation (EUROPOL) claims that around 250 tons of cocaine is smuggled to Europe from Latin America every year.

Economic disparities and social inequities

In 2022, the percentage of people living in poverty was around 29% (~181 million) of Latin America's population. This percentage is after continuous efforts to reduce poverty in Latin America over the last few decades, with the percentage being at 45% in 2000. Even worse, Latin America, alongside the Caribbean, ranks as one of the world's most economically unequal regions, with the 10% highest earners making, on average, 12 times more than the poorest 10%. High levels of poverty and

unemployment rates due to economic instability created a fertile ground for the growth and development of drug cartels. The economic desperation made involvement in drug cartels an attractive option for many individuals, as it was one of the few viable ways to support a family. This meant drug cartels could recruit members and hence expand their influence.

Weak institutions and political involvement

There have been numerous cases that have been reported throughout Latin America where police officers and politicians were found to be under the influence of drug cartels, such as bribery by being on the payroll of major drug cartels. This compromised anti-drug operations and enabled these drug cartels to continue their activities. In some cases, political actors are directly involved in or benefit from the drug trade, whether it is from direct collaboration with the cartels or by turning a blind eye in exchange for financial or political support. Furthermore, weak and underfunded law enforcement agencies lack the resources and sufficient training of law enforcement professionals to effectively combat well-organised and experienced drug cartels.

Current Situation

The current situation in Latin America concerning drug cartels is their role in increasing regional instability and hence threatening the peace and security of the community through their activities. Specifically, they create political unrest by infiltrating federal institutions and using violence and terrorism to maintain power and corruption. Not to overlook how root causes such as poverty and an inefficient economy play into helping these criminal organisations thrive. Overgrowing profits for such organisations also feed into their ability to overpower governments, leading to a weaker governmental system which inevitably becomes a vicious cycle.

Economic crisis

The economic status of Latin America is unquestionably one of the largest reasons for the growth of drug cartels and the region's dependence on the capital they bring in. This capital allows more money to flow into these countries which lack foreign investment. The inflation rate of some of these countries is also alarmingly unsustainable and thus slows down economic growth. Of late, there has been some improvement in the imbalances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and steady economic growth. However, these countries

may experience some challenges in keeping inflation rates and public debt low, knowing their history of struggle regarding this obstacle.

Dependence on profit gained from illicit drugs

The dependence on profit by drug cartels contributes to public insecurity. Drug cartels engage in violent conflicts with each other and with the state forces to control drug production and trafficking routes, often affecting innocent civilians in these acts. The Harvard International Review states that in Mexico alone, at least 170,000 people died between 2006 and 2016 due to conflicts between the government and drug cartels. However, since there are insufficient occupational opportunities and high unemployment rates, some individuals are left with no choice but to join these criminal organisations to provide for their families. Currently, Colombia is said to have a rise in criminal activities caused by being the number one exporter of cocaine—and even more so, Ecuador. Seeing as conflict emerging through drug routes has worsened, homicides have risen, and governmental figures and politicians have been killed.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)

The UNODC assists Member States in developing and implementing holistic and evidence-based solutions to complex and interlinked issues requiring technical, research and normative support. It acts as the chief global organisation against illegal drug trade as well as related crimes. In particular, UNODC promotes cooperation among Latin American countries on topics such as joint operations, information exchange, and coordination of efforts to deal with transnational organised crime and drug trafficking.

United States of America

The U.S. gives significant monetary assistance to fund anti-drug operations in Latin America. Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative have supplied several billions of dollars to assist in increasing the capabilities of police forces, courts, and drug interdiction. The demand for drugs in the U.S. market continues to be high and satisfies the Latin American drug market. This demand therefore puts into market drug cartels, and this, in turn, promotes the production, trafficking and distribution of drugs resulting in violence and instability in drug-producing and transit countries. The U.S. has very strict prosecution policies; therefore, it has the highest incarceration rate in the world because of drug trafficking and usage cases.

Colombia

In Colombia, there have been leading drug cartels such as the Medellín and Cali cartels that have controlled the drug business, especially the production of cocaine, for many years. The history has influenced its domestic policies and its position on the international level concerning drug trafficking and organised crime. Even after the peace agreement signed in 2016 that led to the demobilisation of the FARC, there are still other groups and criminal organisations that have taken over the production and trafficking of drugs. Crime related to drugs in Colombia is high, seeing as it is one of the top two coca bush producers in the world.

Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

Although the USA, Colombia and Mexico have long suffered from drug-related crime, new networking and routing of the drug trade has increased violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador— previously considered safer than their neighbours. These countries are experiencing tough times from two powerful gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18, involved in drug trafficking and other unlawful activities. Transnational drug cartels and other organised criminal groups make Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador some of the most violent countries on Earth for homicide. This violence compounds these nations and spreads an effect on the surrounding nations.

Mexico

In Mexico, the most powerful cartels are the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), and the Gulf Cartel, which control large areas and strategic corridors towards the United States. Their wars create a lot of violence and murder; this leads to insecurity and unpredictability. Mexico also has a history of drug wars which have worsened crime rates and social peace critically. These Mexican cartels are a problem that the government tries to fight against, and more often than not, the government itself contributes to worsening the situation and making the region even more unstable. However, due to the failure of most of the governments to adhere to the above-stated pledges, corruption has continued to thrive in the country, and Mexico has not been able to develop sound and efficient institutions to tackle organised crime. Nonetheless, new changes in the law where possession penalties have been lowered and there is a trend towards legalising cannabis, as well as international cooperation, can be considered as a positive signal.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The three major UN treaties on drugs are:

- UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961 (689J)
 - The Convention on Narcotic Drugs has created a base for the global management of drugs – permitted actions, prohibited substances, legislation, etc.
- UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances 1971
 - This convention centres around regulating hallucinogenic substances, such as LSD, which were causing critical issues in numerous countries at the time.
- UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988
 - This convention has protective measures against drug trafficking, including provisions against money laundering, extradition treaties, and structures to manage cross-border shipments.

These conventions hold great importance and relevance to the discussion, and should be used as the foundation to understand the UN's involvement so far.

Some past Security Council resolutions which also hold relevance:

- S/RES/2482 (2019)
 - This resolution addresses the interlink between international terrorism and organised crime, including drug trafficking.
- S/RES/2195 (2014)

Possible Solutions

In the Security Council, all clauses are debated as if they are legally binding. Therefore delegates should be mindful when drafting their resolutions that the decision of the SC is legally binding upon all U.N. member states.

Measures to address the social instability and insecurity within the region

Delegates can attempt to draft resolutions with clauses that will potentially have an immediate impact on the livelihood of citizens living in Latin America. Restoration of regional security can be done by focusing directly on funding domestic law enforcement and

stricter control of drugs in the form of drug suppression policies. Social instability could be addressed through government funding/providing economic opportunities and education, as well as developing programs focused on job creation, vocational training, and educational scholarships to target the root causes of drug cartel recruitment. To facilitate these policies for less economically developed countries, delegates could look into partnerships with different governments, non-governmental organisations and community groups to provide support services and aid.

Measures to address the violence and influence of the drug cartels

In order to directly reduce the influence and dismantle the power structures of the drug cartels, delegates will need to take on a more aggressive and direct approach, as many previous attempts to do so have not yet been successful. Combatting corruption by implementing robust anti-corruption measures within law enforcement and judicial systems is necessary. When doing so, delegates should also be aware of the risk of inviting third parties to oversee the processes, especially in sensitive matters such as major elections. For such cases requiring foreign involvement, UN monitoring, with a potential panel of experts, could be an option. Other legal measures governments could look into to reduce the influence of the drug cartels are anti-money laundering initiatives or the reformation of drug policies. Stringent anti-money laundering initiatives will disrupt the financial operations of these drug cartels, whilst reforming drug policies could reduce the profitability of drug trade and trafficking.

Measures to encourage global cooperation

As many drug cartels are involved in transnational crimes of trafficking drugs across borders, international cooperation is required to address these crimes effectively. Delegates are highly encouraged to foster international cooperation through multilateral agreements of intelligence sharing and coordinated efforts to combat the drug cartels. International organisations, such as the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL), can provide technical assistance and strategic support. By liaising with different organisations and governmental bodies, delegates can seek to create frameworks for regular communication and collaboration between member nations and these organisations.

Bibliography

Useful Links

- [Drug-trafficking, organised crime and electoral processes in Latin America](#)
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