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FEATURED Q&A

Has Mexico's Kingpin Strategy Failed?



Jesús Malverde, sometimes known as the "narco-saint," is a storied hero in the Mexican state of Sinaloa and is celebrated as a folk saint, particularly revered among drug traffickers for his Robin Hood mythology. // File Photo: Gabriel Saldana via CC License.

Q The International Crisis Group on May 5 published a report evaluating the "kingpin strategy," Mexico's law enforcement focus on targeting drug cartel leaders in order to stem the illegal drug trade. The report states that as drug ring leaders have been removed, the number of armed groups in the country has grown, and criminal activity has reached new geographical regions, diversifying illicit revenue. Has Mexico's kingpin strategy failed, and why has there been an increase in criminal activity? Should the strategy be abandoned, and what would replace it? How could international cooperation and coordination to tackle drug cartels in the Americas be improved?

A Vanda Felbab-Brown, director of the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and senior fellow of foreign policy at The Brookings Institution: "High-value targeting (HVT) has failed to reduce the power of drug-trafficking groups in Mexico and has counterproductively contributed to increases in violence in Mexico. The necessary switch to targeting the middle layer of criminal groups in Mexico has been elusive. But the strategy of the Andrés Manuel López Obrador administration to give up on a law enforcement response to drug trafficking groups is even more problematic. HVT has driven up criminal violence in Mexico in multiple ways. It has transformed a more consolidated multipolar market of some five large criminal organizations, which had deterrence capacity vis-à-vis each other into a highly unstable, highly fragmented multipolar criminal market of very many groups. They have constantly struggled to establish enough deterrence control vis-à-vis

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Brazil's Bolsonaro Plans to Attend L.A. Summit

The far-right Brazilian president plans to meet separately with U.S. President Joe Biden while attending the Summit of the Americas. A bilateral meeting in person would be a first for the U.S. and Brazilian leaders.

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ECONOMIC

Mexico Economy Ends First Quarter on a Positive Note

Gross domestic product expanded 1.0 percent from the previous quarter. However, Mexico's economy remains smaller than it was before the pandemic outbreak in 2020.

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POLITICAL

Boat Carrying More Than 800 Haitians Rescued

The migrants trying to reach the United States wound up instead on the coast of Cuba. U.S. lawmakers this week called on USAID Administrator Samantha Power to increase food aid to Haiti.

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Power // File Photo: U.S. Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Brazil's Bolsonaro Plans to Attend Los Angeles Summit

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has decided to attend the Summit of the Americas being hosted by the United States in Los Angeles next month, and he plans to meet separately with U.S. President Joe Biden, the Associated Press reported, citing three unnamed cabinet ministers in the South American country. A bilateral meeting in Los Angeles would be a first for the U.S. and Brazilian leaders. Biden, a centrist, and Bolsonaro, a far-right former military captain often compared to former U.S. President Donald Trump, have been at odds over issues such as protection of the Amazon rainforest. Who will and won't attend the summit, whether for lack of invitation or refusal to accept, has been a key concern for U.S. officials for years as the date of the meeting has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The most notable possible no-show is now Mexican President Andrés Manuel López



Ebrard // File Photo: Mexican Government.

Obrador, who has threatened to boycott if Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are not included, although he has indicated he would send Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard in his stead. The United States has made some gestures in recent weeks to try to appease López Obrador, such as indicating that lower-level diplomats could attend instead of heads of state from those three countries, which the United States consider to be undemocratic. In an anticipated move, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said Wednesday on Twitter that "under no circumstances" will he attend the Summit,

The Hill reported. Meanwhile, 13 of the 14 member nations of the Caribbean's Caricom group are planning to join the event, according to a senior Caribbean nation official and a Washington-based Caribbean advisor who have been involved in talks about the issue, Reuters reported Wednesday. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the May 10 issue of the Advisor.]

Boat Carrying More Than 800 Haitians Rescued in Cuba

A cramped boat carrying more than 800 Haitians trying to reach the United States wound up instead on the coast of central Cuba, the Associated Press reported. The group, which had been abandoned by the vessel's captain with little food and water after he took their cell phones, arrived Tuesday at Villa Blanca, a town located east of Havana. Now being housed at a tourist campground by the Red Cross, the group reportedly includes 70 children and 97 women. One Haitian refugee said their journey started months ago, and that 15 people "threw themselves into the sea because they couldn't stand hunger," according to the report. The U.S. Coast Guard and other nations have reported intercepting several boats carrying well over 100 Haitians in recent months, but a total of 800 migrants on a single vessel appeared to be unprecedented in recent times. Lack of jobs, food scarcity and a spike in gang-related violence and kidnappings in Haiti has prompted thousands of Haitians to flee their country in the past year. Meanwhile, a group of Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives have called on the Biden administration to expand and improve food aid to Haiti, as nearly half that country's population faces food insecurity, The Hill reported. In a letter to U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator Samantha Power this week, 41 Democrats said they "believe there is an urgent need for our government to act regarding food aid arriving in Haiti and U.S. food assistance policy more broadly," according to the report. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the May 17 issue of the Advisor.]

NEWS BRIEFS

Arco Platform Sees Profit Rise 19 Percent in Q1

Brazilian education services company Arco Platform Limited said Wednesday that net revenue reached 430 million reais (\$89 million) in the first quarter of the year, with gross profit of 314 million reais. Excluding acquisitions that the company concluded last year, net revenue increased 19 percent in the first quarter, Arco said. The company offers a platform that delivers educational content in printed and digital formats to clients in Brazil, targeting primarily students from kindergarten to high school.

Talks Fail in Peru Over Las Bambas Mine Work Stoppage

Talks this week between six Indigenous communities and Peru's government to end a protest that has halted production at MMG's Las Bambas copper mine failed to resolve the conflict, El Comercio reported Wednesday. The Australia-based company says that the 42-day work stoppage has resulted in losses of \$400 million worth of copper exports for the Andean nation. President Pedro Castillo personally joined the talks on Tuesday.

El Salvador Congress Extends Emergency Decree on Gangs

El Salvador's Congress on Wednesday granted a request by President Nayib Bukele for a second extension of the country's anti-gang emergency decree, the Associated Press reported. The vote extends for 30 more days the state of emergency that critics say has swept up innocent people, although polls suggest the emergency decree has strong support among Salvadoran citizens. Since an outbreak of killings in March, authorities have apprehended some 34,500 suspected gang members, according to the AP. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the April 12 issue of the Advisor.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

Mexico Economy Ends First Quarter on a Positive Note

Mexico's economy ended the first quarter on a positive note, expanding in March with gains in industrial output and services, according to data released by the National Statistics Institute on May 25. Gross domestic product expanded 1 percent from the previous quarter in seasonally adjusted terms. Despite the stronger indicators, however, Mexico's economy remains about 1 percent smaller than it was before the pandemic outbreak in 2020, and lingering supply chain problems and soft business confidence could weigh on the growth outlook, according to Goldman Sachs. Meanwhile, INEGI said Wednesday that the trade balance recorded a large \$1.88 billion deficit in April, a figure well below consensus expectations for a surplus of \$540 million.

Brazil Consumer Confidence Falls

A closely followed measure of consumer confidence in Brazil fell by 3.1 points in May, the Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) said Wednesday. The Rio de Janeiro-based research center's ICC index fell to 75.5 points, the same level as in December of 2021, despite the government's recent economic stimulus efforts aimed at buoying voters in a national election year. "The latest consumer confidence results show that despite the improvement of the pandemic and the package of incentives to relieve the financial pressure of families, inflation and the difficulty of obtaining a job continue to negatively impact families, especially those with lower incomes," the ICC index's survey coordinator, Viviane Seda Bittencourt, said in a statement. There was a drop in confidence among all income brackets, except for families with monthly income between 2,100 reais (\$434) and 4,800 reais.

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each other. Moreover, the fragmentation that occurred as a consequence of HVT also split groups internally and made orderly leadership transitions within a criminal group very difficult. It also thrust into leadership positions so-called narco-juniors as well as military lieutenants of captured capos, both of which often lack the capacity for non-violent negotiations of power and lack the leadership authority to prevent violent internal and external challenges to their power. Finally, in areas where HVT weakened a particular cartel, the Mexican government has systematically failed to move in and establish effective governance and deterrent capacity for its law enforcement actors. Moving away from HVT was necessary. But just giving up on law enforcement efforts as the López Obrador administration has done is even worse. It's simply handing Mexico and its people, institutions and economies over to the narcos. To truly live in peace and freedom, Mexico will need to find the will to start confronting Mexican criminal groups again through a smarter law enforcement strategy, not give up on policing."

A **Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, post-doctoral scholar at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California San Diego:** "The increase in criminal activity cannot be attributed exclusively to one cause. One of the key elements when thinking about criminal groups is that we cannot assume they all have the same structure and business model. This matters because removing managers, or the kingpin strategy, will have different effects. For instance, groups where there is mentoring in place tend to be resilient to the removal of managers because others can take over those functions. In groups where operations are carried out by smaller cells, removing a cell leader will likely have little effect in the operation of the rest of the group. The assumption that removing one individual can severely weaken or preclude a criminal

group should be abandoned no less because it is never one individual who is in charge of a complex transnational criminal operation. However, I think the region has much to learn from counterparts in Europe, where targeting managers often results in a large number of arrests. This does have the potential of se-

“I strongly believe the region can benefit from a public health approach to questions of security.”

– Cecilia Farfán-Méndez

verely hindering the operation of a criminal group. The challenge is developing the trust and adequate vetting mechanisms for partners in the region to exchange intel and put together such a complex operation. Furthermore, these operations often require a long-term perspective that we have seldom seen in the region. I strongly believe the region can benefit from a public health approach to questions of security. The human costs of the 'war on drugs' have been tremendous for the region, not only via homicides and disappearances but also overdose deaths in the United States. This should encourage us to think of a public health perspective that focuses on serving the population rather than criminalizing it."

A **Raúl Benítez Manaut, researcher at the Center for Research on North America at the National Autonomous University of Mexico:** "The kingpin strategy was used for the war on terrorism by the George W. Bush administration. In the last century, Colombia's successful capture of Pablo Escobar in December 1993 was achieved using this strategy, as well, which in that country was designed to combat 'narco-terrorism.' In 2008, the Mérida Initiative between Mexico and the United States began, and many of

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its components were copied from Colombia. This was the main mistake of the two countries, since the same kingpin strategy was applied but to different situations. Every time the top boss of a criminal drug trafficking group is captured in Mexico, the organization divides and expands to other geographic areas of the country. In the 1990s, there were two major cartels, Sinaloa and Gulf, and two border groups were located in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. In the first decade of the 21st century, other large criminal groups such as the Zetas, the Familia Michoacana and the Beltrán Leyva organizations grew. By hitting these organizations, other more powerful ones were born. Since the second decade of this century, the most powerful cartel has become the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). It exports fentanyl to the United States, and in that country more than 100,000 young people die each year from its use. The kingpin strategy has also failed due to the weakness of the Mexican justice system, since Mexican laws are not adapted to successfully to combat organized crime, to target corrupt officials who lead that effort, such as Genaro García Luna, to deal with the dispersion of the police (more than 2,000 throughout the country) and, currently, to contend with President López Obrador's strategy of 'hugs not bullets.' The result of this failed effort is that more than 30,000 people die each year in Mexico due to criminal violence."

A **Falko Ernst, senior analyst on Mexico at the International Crisis Group:** "Pursuing and capturing criminal leaders is vital for Mexico to step down from its high plateau of lethal violence. But as a standalone policy operating over the past 15 years, it has played a key part in driving today's geographically expanding, increasingly stubborn and ever more costly set of region-specific armed conflicts. Based on a count by Crisis

Group, the number of active armed groups currently stands at 205—twice as many as a decade ago and a total that has risen despite name after name being crossed off the kingpin list. Criminal structures have been able to bounce back from tactical setbacks involving the loss of their leaders,

“The number of active armed groups currently stands at 205—twice as many as a decade ago.”

— Falko Ernst

and to multiply and turn against civilians in increasingly aggressive ways, as a result of an absence of comprehensive strategies. Communities in high-conflict areas need socio-economic alternatives to illicit involvement. Youngsters drawn into armed groups should be given ways to demobilize, which would help weaken criminal groups' capacity for violence. Essential but largely overlooked enablers of violence including rogue state officials and white-collar brokers need to be targeted through intelligence-led law enforcement. Specific attention needs to be dedicated to the burgeoning and multi-headed extortion economies that feed off unprotected commodity chains, financing individual armed groups and shaping conflicts between them. Understanding and addressing these markets is crucial for building regionally tailored responses. The use of force, just like targeted action against criminal leaders, remains a necessary part of tackling violent conflict in Mexico. Yet in its current formulation, it will continue to deepen it."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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