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INTEGRATED CAMPAIGNING

Countering Threat Networks in Central America.

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INTRODUCTION

The global security environment continues to become more complex, less predictable and less responsive to traditional stabilization efforts. The emergence of transnational and transregional threat networks, hybrid organizations that combine the traits of terrorist, criminal, insurgent and extremist groups, defies the attempts of any single security service to defeat and has become a serious threat to global stability and security.⁰¹ In Central America, TNs traffic in narcotics, weapons, bulk cash, intellectual property, illicit goods and/or people; attack government infrastructure; corrupt state institutions; intimidate and manipulate vulnerable populations; facilitate malign external state activities; spread violence and mayhem; and create instability that serves their purposes.⁰² These TNs share two common characteristics: First, they are hybrid organizations made from a variety of illicit and violent groups and thus employ hybrid tools and tactics such as terrorism, subversion, corruption, illicit trafficking and criminal activity. This makes them extremely difficult for

any single organization to defeat. Second, they seek to avoid direct confrontation with the U.S. and its allies, instead seeking to operate in the gray zone between peace and war.⁰³ This combination of hybrid tools and ambiguous activities allows TNs to take advantage of the U.S. and its partner nations' gaps in authorities and capabilities. Threat networks present challenges beyond the capabilities of any one security service, government agency, or civilian organization to address; thus, a truly combined effort is required. According to the former acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, "We now face advanced transregional threats that demand greater levels of coordination and collaboration. And we are redoubling our focus on building relationships

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Local community members, military and police personal, and community volunteers gather together at an event designed to reduce crime and violence at a school in the heart of a disrupted community in Honduras. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

and international and interagency partners.”⁰⁴ Both the U.S. Department of Defense’s Joint Staff and the U.S. Special Operations Command direct the use of “integrated campaigns” that involve a variety of agencies, organizations and specialties.

BUILDING AN INTEGRATED CAMPAIGN

According to USSOCOM’s Special Operations Force Operating Concept, an *integrated campaign* is a series of integrated joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational activities to achieve operational and strategic objectives. These campaigns may last for decades and the DoD may play only a small role.⁰⁵ The Joint Staff defines integrated campaigning as joint force and inter-organizational partner efforts to enable the achievement and maintenance of policy aims by integrating military activities and aligning non-military activities of sufficient scope, scale, simultaneity and duration across multiple domains.⁰⁶ Thus, the imperative for an integrated campaign is to build strong partnerships, which may include SOF, conventional forces, U.S. Government interagency, partner nation agencies and civil society, tailored to address the specific challenges of the operational environment. A similar concept is articulated by the U.S. Agency for International Development, as a broad coalition of stakeholders that is required to create a whole-of-society approach — an approach that incorporates all parts of society, including national and local governments, the private sector and civil society — to apply each parent organization’s most effective capabilities to problem sets.⁰⁷

This article will examine a whole-of-society integrated campaign designed to counter and prevent threat network influence, decrease and prevent violence and mitigate the drivers of instability that led to irregular migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America. The campaign is led by the USG interagency in cooperation with PN national and local governments and civil society.

THE THREAT TO STABILITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The Northern Triangle of Central America consists of Guatemala,

Honduras and El Salvador and is of strategic importance to the U.S. The combination of extremely high violence, a land route used for smuggling illicit drugs, weapons and other goods, a source and a route for irregular migration, and weak democratic institutions under extreme stress exacerbated by a lack of resources and corruption, make this region, only 900 miles from the U.S. border, of vital importance to the security of the U.S. The principal threats in the Northern Triangle are TNs that take advantage of weak governance and instability to pursue their criminal enterprises. TNs have diversified into smuggling narcotics, weapons and people, including special interest aliens. These groups inflict horrendous violence on vulnerable populations, corrupt and coerce state institutions and directly challenge U.S. allies by degrading security and stability throughout the region. According to USSOUTHCOM’s Theater Strategy, “TNs are now the principal threat to regional security and stability.”⁰⁸

The TNs’ threat to stability comes from both their illicit activities and their efforts to corrupt and shape the operational environment to make it more permissive. The volume of illicit contraband smuggled into the U.S. threatens the peace and health of the U.S. Additionally, this illicit flow has created a window of vulnerability which could potentially be used to smuggle members of terrorist organizations and weapons of mass destruction into the U.S. The second, and perhaps most insidious threat, is the instability and weak governance created by TNs using a combination of violence and corruption so close to the U.S. border. This instability is a major driver for many Central Americans who attempt migration without documentation to the U.S., while others are forced to collaborate with or join TNs for protection. All this occurs within driving distance of the U.S. border.

THE INTEGRATED CAMPAIGN PLAN FOR CENTRAL AMERICA

In light of the importance of stability in Central America to the security of the United States, the USG developed a new *Strategy for Engagement in Central America*.⁰⁹ This strategy

has three pillars: improved security, economic and social development, and better governance in the region. Additionally, as part of this, the USG has assisted the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador to develop their own strategies to address the same factors.¹⁰ The Northern Tier governments’ *Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle* (A4P) and the USG’s *Strategy for Engagement in Central America* both focus on the same pillars of security, development and governance.¹¹

A subset of the CEN Strategy is a set of programs designed to mitigate factors that lead to extreme violence in the Northern Triangle. Violence is a driver of instability. Extreme violence blocks efforts to improve security, governance and prosperity and stimulates migration. Thus, the USG has developed Place-Based Strategies to reduce crime, violence and homicides. The USG adapted PBS first in Honduras in 2014 and has replicated versions of it in El Salvador and Guatemala. PBS in the region started as a joint effort between USAID and the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The strategy outlines and prescribes a focus in targeted communities that suffer from the highest levels of violent crime. This strategy recognizes the critical interdependence of both prevention activities and enhanced law enforcement capacity to address the current elevated levels of violent crime. The interagency USG team in Honduras describes their PBS strategy as matching a wide spectrum of prevention actions with improved trust and effectiveness of local police, focused on “hot spot” communities with the highest levels of homicides. Better access to reliable crime data helps identify the key neighborhoods, individuals and interventions needed, while sharing evidence of “what works” with alliances of communities and local law enforcement guides continual adjustment and improvement in tactics and strategies to reduce violence and increase community resiliencies.¹²

Lessons from the U.S., Mexico, and other places, has shown the PBS teams that 1) violence concentrates in places (hot spots) where TNs frequently exercise critical influence or even control; 2) victims and perpetrators are unevenly distributed across

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the community (in Central America, predominantly among young men); and 3) violence is mostly driven by group dynamics (in this case, by gangs and TNs).¹³ By focusing on groups of the right people in the right places instead of relying on traditional, unarticulated activities aimed at a community at large, USAID and their local partners have been more effective. New trust and improved communications between neighborhoods and law enforcement, together with stronger community platforms for social services and support for youth at risk, especially young men and boys, have likely contributed to significant drops in homicides in Honduras. National homicide rates in Honduras have dropped from a high of 86/100,000 in 2011 to 46/100,000 in 2017, and rates in some PBS communities have



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dropped even more dramatically.¹⁴ While more evidence and action are required, the USG and PNs are committed to pursuing and adapting localized PBS strategies for community security.

Place-Based Strategies were designed to leverage the very different comparative advantages of USG agencies. Intentional and comprehensive interagency cooperation better connects individual agencies' authorities and programs and focuses more relevant assets and actions in the most violent urban "hot spots."¹⁵ An open PBS strategy can also synchronize with, and reinforce, PN and community security and development programs. In the

Place-Based Strategies in the Northern Triangle, USAID supports increasing community and family resiliencies to risk, crime and violence. It helps create safe spaces and community cohesion through community and youth centers, secure parks and safer streets and schools as platforms for community engagement. The USAID strengthens local social service delivery, including better community policing and programs for youth at risk of joining gangs and their families (i.e. intensive family therapy, mentoring, expanding schools and vocational training, and school violence prevention). INL focuses on building efficiencies, effectiveness in

police capabilities and accountable law enforcement officers who build trust and legitimacy to better protect and serve their communities. Working with the police to identify hot spots within the PBS sectors and increasing proactive patrolling in these areas have dramatically reduced the opportunity for homicides to be committed in these areas. INL has also transformed the quality of police criminal and gang investigations in the northern triangle. USAID and INL are key partners in developing community policing programs in the Northern Triangle law enforcement agencies. These programs are designed to improve the relationship and communications between the police and the communities they protect. Along with CPPs, USAID has nurtured the creation of dozens of community-police committees against crime and violence. In addition, INL works to promote rehabilitation and reinsertion of adult inmates exiting prison, including ex-gang members. Focusing on the greatest number of "hot people" in the "hottest" areas helps prevent further victimization and deter perpetrators from committing homicides in these communities. Both INL and USAID, working with the U.S. Department of Justice, collaborate to strengthen the host countries' justice sectors, including stronger forensic investigations and better prosecutions. Of utmost importance, USG collaboration, especially by USAID and INL through PBS,



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Honduras National Police interact with school children during a Joint Task Force-Bravo event in Honduras.

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A Joint Task Force-Bravo doctor and a police cadet talk with a family about medical needs during a medical readiness exercise in Honduras.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS

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empowers PN organizations, public and private institutions, and civil society groups to sustain crime and violence prevention strategies. The U.S. interagency and country team in each embassy has created a PBS Working Group to drive strategy, synchronize existing programs and develop new ideas.¹⁶ Based on the existing relationships of trust between USSOUTHCOM and the USG Country Teams, the PBS planners incorporated USSOUTHCOM, primarily the SOC-Forward and Joint Task Force-Bravo (discussed below), into the PBSWG, beginning in Honduras in 2015.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE ROLE

The DoD role in PBS is purposefully small, but is tailored to have a significant impact. This includes SOF, CF the USSOUTHCOM Humanitarian Assistance Program and the Security Cooperation Office, which, as part of the USG Country Team in each embassy, managed much of the interactions between USG agencies and DoD elements.

All SOF forces in the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility are under the operational control of Special Operations Command-South and include a forward command control node located in Honduras that is responsible for all SOF in Central America. The SOCFWD includes Special Forces

Operational Detachment-Alpha, Naval Special Warfare Units, Civil Affairs teams and Military Information Support Teams. MIST and CA teams have been active in these countries for years, but recently pivoted to also support PBS, working through USAID and INL, while other SOCFWD activities such as SFODA partner with INL to train specialized police units providing indirect support to PBS.

CA Role – SOCSOUTH employs CA forces drawn primarily from the U.S. Army; however, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps have also contributed CA forces over the last 10 years. U.S. Army active component forces include the 95th CA Brigade and the 83rd CA Battalion and reserve component forces are drawn primarily from the 350th CA Command.

SOCSOUTH employs its CA forces to 1) expand the enterprise's understanding of the civil component of the operational environment; 2) build the capacity of the PN security services for civil engagement and civil-military operation; and 3) expand the friendly network, which consists of USG, PN and civil society organizations and facilitates cooperation and collaboration throughout the network in order to make the OE less permissive for T3Ns. CA forces leverage tools to plan and execute civic action projects in collaboration with the friendly network and as a platform to enable collaboration. CA teams support PN medical and small-scale engineering projects

in order to empower PN legitimacy and improve the connection between PN security services and the communities they are tasked to protect.

To facilitate close cooperation between CA forces and the U.S. Country Teams, SOCSOUTH has also deployed CA planners to work with Country Teams. The specific role of each CA planner varies depending on the unique requirements of each country, but basic duties include working closely with both the USAID and INL missions to plan and synchronize activities in support of PBS.

MISO Role (SOF) – The 1st Military Information Support Operations Battalion, headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is geographically assigned to the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility. This battalion has conducted continuous rotations in the Northern Triangle of Central America since 2008. MISTs plan, develop, and conduct joint and/or combined military information support operations and synchronize information-related capabilities for regional contingencies. The MIST main efforts in the Northern Triangle are providing support to PN security forces to counter networks that threaten the homeland and countering drug activities and transitional organization crime. Recently, this support has been decisive in improving National Police strategic communications and recruitment campaigns.

Regional MISTs work with the U.S. Country Teams and PN security forces

to design programs in support of PBS to increase public support for their security forces and increase security force recruitment. MISTs assist in increasing support for police forces in high crime areas and increasing resiliencies against criminal activity in various cities throughout the region.

JTF-B Role (CF) - Joint Task Force Bravo is a conventional-force formation that has been in operation in Central America since the early 1980s and is based out of Soto Cano Joint Air Base in central Honduras. JTF-B is tasked by USSOUTHCOM to synchronize activities within the Central America joint operational area as one of the lead components of USSOUTHCOM's counter-threat network strategy in CENTAM. JTF-B conducts and supports a variety of operations and exercises in support of USSOUTHCOM. One key activity is Joint Task Force-B's medical readiness training exercises that are designed both to build its own capacity for rapid response and to support other components' training exercises. Although these exercises are designed as DoD training events, they require significant coordination with PN military and health ministries. Thus, JTF-B has deep institutional knowledge of the planning and execution of medical events and strong relationships with PN medical elements, such as civilian Ministries of Health, throughout Central America.

As JTF-B started working with the PBS team, it adapted its medical programs to support PBS/PN police requirements. JTF-B provided specialized medical expertise and leveraged its existing relationships with regional health ministries. JTF-B scaled its participation in PN-led events to an appropriately small number of DOD participants.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER - CHAMELECÓN

A recent example of this integrated campaign in action can be seen in the community of Chamelecon, Honduras, a suburb of San Pedro Sula, the second largest city and industrial heart of Honduras. Chamelecon suffers from extremely high violence under constant turf wars between T3Ns, primarily MS-13 and Barrio 18. Many neighborhoods of Chamelecon are effectively hostage to these T3Ns — local buses are extorted multiple times en route as they pass through different territories, schools have frequently suffered from massive absenteeism when students cannot walk to their schools through rival gang borders, and entire neighborhoods are abandoned due to gang threats. Because of these T3Ns' control in these spaces, both the HNP and Government of Honduras' ability to provide security and services in them were severely limited.

Chamelecon was the first PBS priority and the Honduras National Police Metropolitan Prevention Police Precinct 6, responsible for the area, has worked closely with the PBS team and the Community Committee as part of the CPP HNP focus on developing a positive relationship with the community. The UMEP6 chief determined that a medical civil action event, as part of a series of CPP activities, would enhance the relationship between the HNP and the community as well as empower the Community Committee. UMEP6, working with INL, invited the SOCFWD and JTFB to participate in the proposed event.

The Chamelecon planning group primarily consisted of members of the Community Committee, which included the UMEP6 Police Chief, Chamelecon public school representatives, the Chamelecon Fire Department, local businesses, district Ministry of Health officials and several local non-governmental organizations. This group was supported by the MIST, CA team, and representatives from JTF-B as well as INL representatives. The UMEP6 commander selected a secondary school in the heart of a disputed neighborhood with a supportive staff and a securable location to control access. By involving local NGOs, the CA team helped expand the role and visibility of civil society in the event. Simultaneously, the MIST worked with UMEP6 to develop the public messaging plan



01 A Joint Task Force-Bravo Medical Element team member measures a young boy's arm circumference during a joint pediatric nutritional assessment by the Honduran Ministry of Health, Joint Task Force-Bravo and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

02 Joint Task Force-Bravo Medical Element team members sort medications during a pediatric nutritional assessment in Honduras.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY MARIA PINEL

for the event and create products for distribution at the Medical Civic Action Program JTF-B worked with the MOH to plan the layout of treatment locations, determine the requirements for medicine and medical supplies and design the patient flow. JTF-B also supplied several medical specialists to augment the MOH team. The CA team worked with the Security Cooperations Office's HAP manager to provide appropriate medical supplies for the event. MIST and the CA team conducted an assessment of the population to evaluate their needs and popular sentiment. Several HNP specialized units, including the HNP SWAT team, *Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad* (TIGRES), and the HNP crime scene investigative unit, also participated, thereby increasing their own visibility and contact with the local population.

The Chamelecon MEDCAP was successfully executed with no security incidents, treating approximately 2,000 patients. The event allowed a broad coalition of groups to work together toward a common goal, expanded trusted relationships and achieved a positive outcome. The success of the event also reinforced for the community the positive roles both the police and the Community Committee play in protecting and improving their community. The Community Committee, through its strong leadership in the event, capitalized on the increased solidarity built by this MEDCAP to plan follow-on events. Both the PBSWG and the HNP assessed the project as successful.

This event was just one in a series of partnership programs and events planned by the PN with support from the PBS team designed to expand and empower the friendly network and protect the communities.

CONCLUSION

T3Ns are hybrid organizations that use a variety of tools to manipulate social, governmental, economic and security problems in vulnerable environments to make the environment more permissive for their nefarious activities. Although this phenomenon is a direct threat to the U.S., it is not fundamentally a military problem; instead, it calls for a variety

of organizations and expertise working together and applying both “soft” and “hard” skills and tools appropriate to addressing these challenges. Creation of integrated campaigns that involve a variety of expertise can be an effective approach to addressing the complex social, governance and security problems that enable T3N activities.

A place-based strategy, as has been applied in Central America, is an excellent example of a USG and PN plan with small but consequential DOD involvement through appropriate SOF and CF expertise.

Although no single integrated campaign model can work in all situations, the PBS model exemplifies broad participation, flexibility, application of specific expertise from different USG agencies and local organizations, and a willingness to cooperate with non-traditional partners. It is an excellent model for SOF operators to study and adapt as they prepare for their next integrated campaigns. 

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