

# The Nested Security Model of Conflict in the War on Drugs in North-Central America

by

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## Cover-Page

## Executive Summary

In 2006 the Mexican government started a war against an internal enemy. The enemy was not conventional and formed by different groups deployed in the all-country. In 2008, the Bush administration decided to support this Mexican fight and created a financial program called Merida Initiative, a fund designed to improve the military capacity of antinarcotics forces, among other activities. After fourteen years of the war, and twelve of the Merida Initiative, the results are disappointing. In Mexico, with almost 250,000 deaths, forced migration, disappearances, and controlling the market in North and Central America, the war on drugs and the Merida Initiative a failed regional security regime.

This thesis aims to apply the Nested Security model of conflict analysis to explain how the US external intervention was one of the causes of the escalation of conflict in Mexico and Central America. Using three levels of analysis (systemic, regional, and domestic), I explore the causes of the conflict's spillover. Furthermore, I investigate the US's role as the hegemony in the construction of a regional security regime in North-Central America. I use a mixed-methods approach, creating maps of conflict's spillover, and graphics of the relationship between antinarcotics programs and organized violent events and homicides. I find that framing the drug problem as a war, escalated the conflict in North-Central America. Additionally, I find that external intervention does not escalate the conflict unless there is a domestic legitimization

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To the family Alvaro Montes de Oca.

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This thesis is dedicated to Luis Antonio

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## Introduction

In 2006 the Mexican government started a war against an internal enemy. The enemy was not conventional and formed by different groups deployed in the all-country. This enemy had different names: cartels, criminal organizations, *narcos*, *sicarios*; but, beyond all the names and locations of this enemy, the fight was called a war against drugs. In 2008, the Bush administration decided to support this Mexican fight and created a financial program called Merida Initiative, a fund designed to improve the military capacity of antinarcotics forces, among other activities. The program aimed to avoid the expansion of these criminal organizations that were growing in Mexico from 1920.

Fourteen years after the war, the results are unsatisfactory. By 2006, drug trafficking in Mexico was controlled by five big cartels. In 2018 were registered more than ten criminal organizations in the all country and around 50 smaller, which resulted from cartels' internal divisions. Now, the Mexican cartels have a presence in more than 50 countries <sup>1</sup>. In Mexico, with almost 250,000 deaths, forced migration, disappearances, and controlling the market in North and Central America, the war on drugs and the Merida Initiative a failed regional security regime.

When asking about how the cartels increased their influence, many explanations arise. From the absence of social programs to combat the inequality in Mexico and the failure of programs

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<sup>1</sup>Globally, País, "Radiografía del cartel de Sinaloa."

to reduce drug consumption in the US, there is no agreement about this conflict. From a systemic approach, international elements affected the course of the domestic war in Mexico. At the same time, the domestic escalation of the conflict has affected the all-region. Local answers do not portray the complexity of this conflict. The war on drugs cannot be understood unless we highlight the conflict as a regional issue.

The war on drugs is a global conflict that presents regional and domestic components. One of the main world enclaves of the war is North-Central America (onwards NC-A) and particularly in Mexico. Most of the studies of war on drugs come from disciplines such as sociology of violence, anthropology, and Law. However, IR authors had contributed to the discussion. Such as the case of, Mercille<sup>2</sup>, who analyzes the Manichean history of the war on drugs; she highlights how the war on drugs has been simplified as a conflict between Cartels and States when the reality is more complicated. By problems such as corruption and weak institutions, some government levels have been tainted to work with criminal organizations. The author also demonstrates the US's responsibility to increase conflict in both Mexico and the US.

Many studies about the war on drugs observe that there was the Merida Initiative, the breaking point in the increase of drug-related conflict in NC-A. Hunt<sup>3</sup> analyzes the effects of the war on drugs in the MI and the increase in homicides and drug-related violence in Mexico from 2006 to 2019, elaborating a correlation between drug-related homicides and complementary counternarcotics assistance from the US Department of Defense. Meanwhile,

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<sup>2</sup> Mercille, "Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony?"

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, "Staying the Course in Mexico."

authors such as Carpenter<sup>4</sup> claims that the US intervention's problem has been a consequence of framing this conflict as a war.

Nonetheless, she does not theorize the role of the regional and hegemonic actors in the configuration of drug-related conflict as a war. Carpenter argues that framing the cartel conflict as a war drove to a military strategy to combat the Drug Cartels. This strategy resulted in an increase in violence and a spread of the conflict around the region. This conflict's spillover was broadly explored by Bagley and Rosen<sup>5</sup>, who states that the US strategy of war on drugs in Latin America has resulted in a balloon effect of crime. After been confronted, the cartels look for other spaces to continue their activities. However, neither Carpenter nor Bagley and Rose explain why the MI had more effect on the conflict's spillover than previous US antinarcotics programs in Mexico.

Most of the works mentioned point to the international dimension of the war on drugs; nonetheless, there is no explanation about how this conflict was constituted from the international to domestic level. To explore this dynamic, I use the Nested Security Model of Conflict<sup>6</sup>, a template for conflict analysis that permits the integration of the local and environmental elements and actors in a systemic model of conflict management. Drawing on Hunt, Carpenter, and Bagley and Rosen, I will apply the NS analysis of conflict, exploring how the exogenous pressures led to the destabilization of the conflict. To demonstrate the US

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<sup>4</sup> Carpenter, "Changing Lenses."

<sup>5</sup> Bagley and Rosen, *Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in the Americas Today*.

<sup>6</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*.

role prior to MI's, I explore the antinarcotics financial policies (coordinated by the US Department of State and Department of Defense) from 2001 to 2017.

The drug-related conflict implicates many elements of analysis from the economic, social, and cultural evaluation. However, this thesis analyzes the war on drugs as a systemic dynamic. The study is about how these international programs affected the region's situation in terms of violence and how they provoked the expansion of drug Cartels' activities in Central and North America. The study focus on the effects of MI in Central America is focused on Honduras and Guatemala regarding Mexican drug cartels' current presence in these countries. This thesis aims to assess the regional effects of US intervention in the drug-related conflict in Mexico. I argue that the war framing of drug-related conflict led to engagement that unnested State-Cartel relations escalating violence

Drawing on the theory of Nested Security, this thesis investigates how the exogenous intervention of a third party in a domestic conflict can exacerbate conflict. The Nested Security model of conflict is based on the next assumptions

- 1.- "In the absence of regional stability, cooperative techniques may not succeed even when conditions on the ground are optimal for conflict mediation,
- 2.- "Protracted internal conflicts are rarely confined to the borders of a single state,"

3.- “Once external conflict dynamics interact with internal conflict dynamics, these conflicts tend to reinforce one another, making it exponentially harder to suppress or contain an emerging civil conflict through soft power...”

4.- Conflict dynamics at higher levels tend to have a disproportionate impact on conflict dynamics at lower levels.<sup>7</sup>

The study of this thesis is about the Merida Initiative, a financial program started in 2008 and funded by the US to improve the military and police capacity of Mexican institutions in anti-narcotic actions. The research tests the next question:

*What is the US's role in the war on drugs in North Central America through the lens of the Nested Security?*

This question will be outlined under the next hypothesis

1.- Merida Initiative is not the beginning of the US foreign intervention on counternarcotics programs in Mexico; however, it generated conditions of instability without precedent.

2.- Framing the drug-related conflict as a *war against drugs* increased violence and the spread of conflict around the region.

3.- Exogenous intervention can exacerbate domestic conflicts.

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<sup>7</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*.

I demonstrate that the US had antinarcotics programs before Merida Initiative that did not destabilize the drug-related conflict. However, MI had an instability effect due to two conditions:

- The domestic adoption of the war framing in the drug-related conflict in Mexico (2006).
- The increase of military expending in the counternarcotics programs.

The methodology presents a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, explaining the constitution of the regional security regime in NC-A as a war on drugs, I show the effects of the US's external intervention in the drug-related conflict. This intervention created a spillover of the conflict in Mexico and *the Central American Triangle*<sup>8</sup>. I use data extracted from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) from 2001 to 2017, creating maps through ArcGis software. UCDP features conflict-related data of organized violent events from 1996, with geolocation records, necessary to create the maps.

Second, I present US foreign investment in antinarcotics programs previous and during MI, and how it is related to drug-related violence in Mexico. Using the USAID database<sup>9</sup>, I filtered the US financial support to antinarcotics programs in Mexico from 2001 to 2019.

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<sup>8</sup>, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

<sup>9</sup> Web portal of the US government of funds intended to other countries.

This allows me to illustrate the relation between anti-narcotic programs and homicides in Mexico divided into three phases

I.- Previous MI: 2001-2007.

II.- MI implementation: 2008-2010

III.- Beyond Merida: 2010-2017

For an NS analysis of the war on drugs, I use concepts from Jenne<sup>10</sup> such as exogenous destabilization referring to the case when a third-external party intervention increases violence. The other concept is a regional security regime defined as a set of norms established for the de-escalation and prevention of conflicts that can affect more than one country. Interventions describe any action from a third-party that affects the conflict's situation on a domestic level. Hegemonic power is a State that can use force to affect (positively or negatively) the status of given conflicts outside its borders. The hegemonic power is a State without counterweight within the system

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<sup>10</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*.

## Chapter. Conceptualizing the conflict in international relations

### Expected contribution

This thesis explores the relation between MI and the increase in violence in North and Central America (NC-A). Hunt<sup>11</sup> investigates the role of the US in the war on drugs in Mexico from 2006 until 2019, establishing a correlation between drug-related homicides and complementary counternarcotics assistance from the US Department of Defense. The war on drugs is not something exclusive to NC-A. Europe, Central Asia, and Middle East regions are dealing with drug-related conflict as well. Other wars on drugs can be founded in Ferri et al.<sup>12</sup> who present the results of six strategies, involving one hundred forty-eight countries on four continents, to prevent and combat drug trafficking. What is the particularity of the war on drugs in America? As Mercille<sup>13</sup> mentions, the region has two salient features. The Mexican Cartels are among the most powerful criminal organizations in drug distribution in the world, and the leader in the international war against drugs, the US. I demonstrate how the war on drugs connects hegemonic States to internal conflicts in the target State.

The war on drugs is not just a domestic conflict of police prosecuting drug traffickers. Furthermore, it is an international crusade from the US against those nations (and sometimes the governments) who produce and distribute the cocaine. As shown in figure 1, the nested

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<sup>11</sup> Hunt, "Staying the Course in Mexico."

<sup>12</sup>, Ferri et al., "A Review of Regional Drug Strategies across the World."

<sup>13</sup> Mercille, "Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony?"

security model demonstrate three dimensions of the nested conflict. In the local stage, the Mexican government and army are fighting against the drug Cartels<sup>14</sup>. At the regional level of war on drugs, the North America area is formed by the US and Mexico, and Central America by Honduras, and Guatemala due to the presence of Mexican Cartels<sup>15</sup>; together, they embody the NC-A region. The hegemonic or systemic level incorporates the US. This country is not just part of the region; they play the role of hegemony, which can affect the scenario of any conflict in the region as a dominant outside party. The MI (as a US financial program to combat drug trafficking), was executed by the US as the hegemonic actor while another member of the NC-A region.

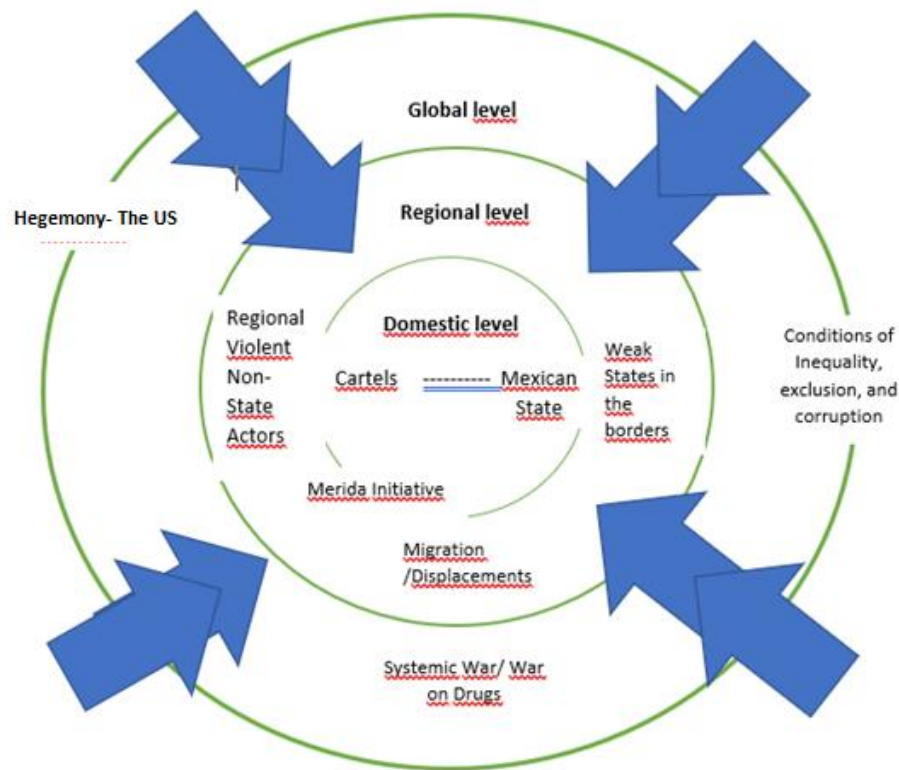


Figure 1 Nested Conflict Model  
 Note. For the original model, check *Nested Security*, 2015:33

<sup>14</sup>; however, the division is not that clear in reality, as I will explain in the next section.

<sup>15</sup> In the empirical part, I will explain why these countries are representative of the spread of conflict.

The spread of Cartel activities from Mexico to Central American countries is sustained on the *balloon effect* theory. Bagley and Rosen explain that "balloon" or "cockroach" effect of the war on drugs as the result of the US counternarcotics measures (mainly financial aid) in Latin American countries. This intervention resulted in a switch in traffic routes, and the organization looking for corruptible spaces and countries to develop their activities.

Bagley and Rosen describe the MI as a bilateral international agreement, but they do not explain the different levels of the conflict from domestic to regional and systemic. Altogether with Carpenter, they explain how framing the drug conflict as a war provoked the fight's spread. However, they do not indicate how this war was transformed from the systemic, regional, and domestic levels. As mentioned in the introduction, the Nested Security (onwards NS) allows us to explain how the conflicts are mediated or escalated depending on regional stability, the influence of the environment, and hegemony's role in the conflict. The application of NS theory to the war on drugs will demonstrate how the systemic and regional level affect local conflicts, and how the intervention of exogenous parties can result in the escalation of domestic conflict.

## 1.- Intra-State conflict and Violent Non-State Actors

Buzan and Waever<sup>16</sup> explain how, after the Cold War, conflicts in modern societies are less inter-state and more intra-state. There are antagonist groups inside some Nations, representing a political, military, and symbolic contest to traditional powers such as the State,

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<sup>16</sup> Buzan and Waever, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security."

governments, and International Organizations. These groups are known as *Violent Non-State Actors-VNSA* (Olsson y Fabrin Wildner<sup>17</sup>; Gartenstein-Ross and Barr<sup>18</sup>). Olsson and Fabrin Wildner explain these VNSAs are "emergent actors, the protagonist in a world stage, with the capabilities to influence State's political decisions". These antagonist groups can move resources around the world and are capable to mobilize assets to pressure less powerful States.

The VNSAs are different from other Non-State Actors such as NGOs because they use violence, fear, or intimidation to accomplish their objectives. Example of VNSAs are Warlords and their militias in outlying regions, gang leaders in townships and squatter settlements, vigilante-type organizations, ethnically based protection rackets, millenarian religious movements, transnational networks of extended family relations, organized crime or new forms of tribalism<sup>19</sup>

Thomas and Casebeer<sup>20</sup> emphasize that VNSA are *identity entrepreneurs*". This means that they use ethnic, racial, economic, or social-political inequalities to mobilize people against traditional powers such as the State. They can build international networks and are part of the globalization process; this suggests that political borders do not limit their actions.

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<sup>17</sup> Olsson and Fabrin Wildner, «Os movimentos terroristas como atores não estatais e o exercício do poder simbólico | doi.»

<sup>18</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Startup Companies and Violent Non-State Actors Are Changing the Old World Order."

<sup>19</sup> Villa and Souza Pimenta, "Violent Non-State Actors and New Forms of Governance."

<sup>20</sup> Thomas and Casebeer, "Violent Systems," 77.

## 2.- The Nested Security Model of Conflict Analysis

One of the aims of international organizations is to avoid the escalation of the conflict to prevent the causes of wars and humanitarian crises. To achieve that, these organizations work on conflict prevention or resolution (when the conflict is already initiated). After the experience of World War II and the post-Cold War stage, ethnonational conflicts have occupied the more attention of the international community, due to the risk that symbolizes for Nation-States. However, ethnic struggles are among many types of conflicts that require the international system's attention. Beyond Europe, there exist another kind of VNSAs, such as transnational gangs, transnational criminal organization, drug Cartels, among other things which threaten the stability of States and regions.

To analyze the causes and effects of the international conflict in North-Central America, I apply the Nested Security conflict model to VNSAs. The NS theory allows me to model the influence of States and non-state actors, international organizations, and regional elites that play a role in the struggle. The NS theory holds that conflict resolution requires a stable regional environment; this requires the assessment of the combined effect of regional struggles on domestic conflicts and vice versa. Furthermore, it analyzes the process of exogenous to endogenous stabilization. Based on the role of international, regional, and domestic actors, the Nested Security model is designed to identify the kind of intervention that can stabilize or destabilize conflicts.

## 2.1. The responsibility to protect. The external intervention of international conflicts.

In the international mediation of conflict, the intervention is often accomplished by third actors with the military, economic, or political power to de-escalate or prevent conflict. Jenne<sup>21</sup> explains how the participation of third parties that negotiate with domestic actors can define a successfully mediated conflict. At the environmental level, the hegemonic intervention can induce pacts between host governments and external patrons, necessary to de-escalate the conflict.

The NS model holds that a domestic conflict cannot be solved without regional stabilization. The NS is different from other models of conflict due relevance of the *environmental-systemic* context in the resolution/mediation of the struggle. In a general sense, this is the NS argument which I use to analyze this thesis. In NS, Jenne<sup>22</sup> proposes a model whereby the regional and hegemonic actors must participate in nesting (stabilize) the conflict as displayed in the next table

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<sup>21</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*.

<sup>22</sup> Jenne.

Table 1 Nested security hypothesis

Table 2.3 Nested security hypotheses

1. Destabilization	—————→	Nested insecurity
Variant A: <i>If the minority is leveraged, the domestic conflict is likely to escalate as the leveraged minority mobilizes to obtain concessions from the center.</i>		
Variant B: <i>If the majority is leveraged, the domestic conflict is likely to escalate as the leveraged majority seeks to gain ground against a restive minority.</i>		
2. Exogenous stabilization	—————→	Nested security ( <i>the domestic conflict is likely to de-escalate, but both sides will remain mobilized</i> )
3. Endogenous stabilization	—————→	Consolidated nested security ( <i>the domestic divide loses political salience; sustained inter-group cooperation may emerge</i> )

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The NS model represents the types of conflict's intervention. When a third-party intervenes to stabilize the conflict, we have exogenous stabilization. Once that mediation is undertaken by domestic and regional actors, without the dependence of an exogenous player, the endogenous stabilization is achieved. This intervention can occur due to outside intervention of conflict, either to help one side or another.

The NS model is mainly addressed to ethnic-nationalist conflict analysis; however, NS analysis can be applied to explain the dynamics of other internationalized conflicts. One of NS's chief lessons is how the domestic, regional, and systemic are integrated levels of the same phenomenon. Jenne's concludes that most of the conflicts at the domestic level have the potential to become systemic in an unstable regional environment, even those that do not involve ethnic struggles. In a context where the new VNSAs are potential threats to the national, regional, and systemic equilibrium, NS indicates the relevance of a contextual approach to third-party intervention/mediation. She argues that *regional security regimes*

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<sup>23</sup> Jenne, 38.

(RSR) are the ideal means to securely nest conflicts<sup>24</sup>. Jenne describes the RSR as "a set of norms and practices established within a certain territorial remit to halt the escalation of violent conflict within and/or between states."<sup>25</sup> Hence, although third-party intervention is essential, the participation of endogenous actors is fundamental to nest a conflict.

One of the current approaches for external stabilization of conflict is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). In words of Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, it “shapes major power rhetorical responses to civil war”<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, the authors point out that intervention is also an opportunity for States to impose a regional security regime<sup>27</sup>. A similarity between Buzan and Waever’s securitization<sup>28</sup> and Medzihorsky *et al.* is the relevance of the discursive framing of conflicts by third actors. In securitization studies, the securitizing actor, who has the agency to say when something or someone is threatening the continuation of the society, does this through a speech, then, the discursive mention of something as a threat is the first step of securitization. Afterward, "the securitizing actor, therefore, claims a [*sic.*] right to use extraordinary means or break normal rules for security"<sup>29</sup>. In the same way, Medzihorsky *et al.* argue that "if political actors successfully frame an event as a problem invoking a given norm, then certain policy solutions become thinkable, if not inevitable"<sup>30</sup>.

As Medzihorsky *et al.* argue, the way to frame and name the conflict impacts third parties' kind of intervention/mediation. In the case at hand, I demonstrate how the drug-related

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<sup>24</sup> Jenne, Saideman, and Lowe, "Separatism as a Bargaining Posture."

<sup>25</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of Civil Conflict Management," 1.

<sup>27</sup> Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of Civil Conflict Management."

<sup>28</sup> Buzan and Waever, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security."

<sup>29</sup> Buzan and Waever, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of Civil Conflict Management," 1.

conflict was framed as a war by a third party. Such framing led to a certain kind of hegemonic intervention.

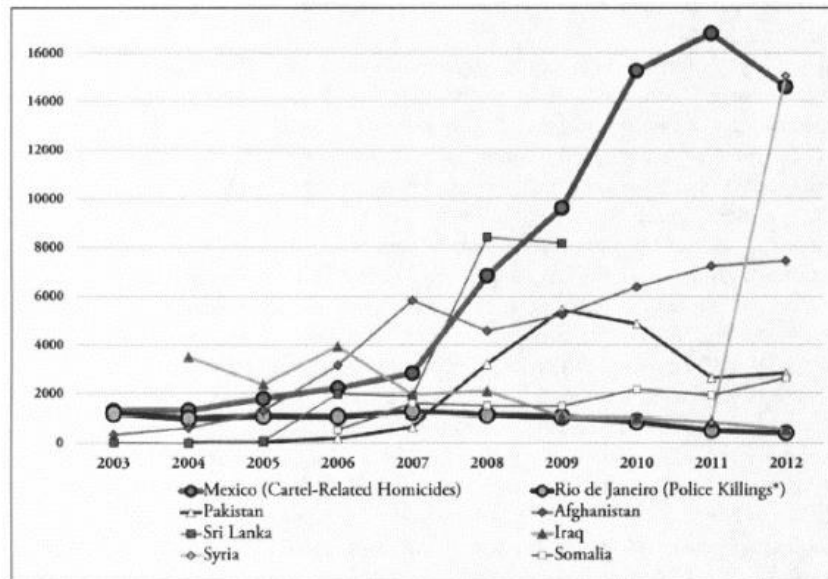
### 3.- Nested security. From ethnic to VNSA conflict.

The NS model can be applied to analyze the North-Central American Region. The conflicts in this area are related to a history of dictatorships, civil wars, and current wars against criminal organizations. The actors of the war on drugs are mainly criminal organizations called drug Cartels against the States. While this war has mainly affected Mexico and the US, from 2010, the Cartels expanded their activities to the Central American States, such as Guatemala and Honduras.

The conflict analyzed in this thesis is between the VNSA (particularly drug Cartels) and the State. The VSNA-State conflict in Mexico is one of the deadliest in the world. In figure 2, Lessing<sup>31</sup> shows that between 2002 and 2012, the Cartel-related homicide rates in Mexico were higher than those in civil conflicts in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, or Syria. Although every country has a different context, the author draws attention to the fact that neither Mexico nor Brazil are in a formal war. No armies or states are confronting each other. The casualty rate is a consequence of the confrontation among Cartels, and Cartels against the State. NS says that a domestic conflict become much worse due to regional destabilization, and regional destabilization would influence in domestic conflict.

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<sup>31</sup> Lessing, "Logics of Violence in Criminal War."



**Figure 1.** Civil and criminal war battle deaths, 2003–2012. Sources: Mexico: Shirk et al. (2013); Rio: Instituto de Segurança Pública do Rio de Janeiro (ISP-RJ 2013); Civil wars: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP 2013). \*Resistência com morte do opositor—auto de resistência (Resistance with death of the opposer).

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*Chart 1 Civil and Criminal wars*

Lessing explains that, contrary to civil wars, VNSA's are not fighting to conquer state power, Cartels (and VNSAs) don not want to supplant the State. Ethnic conflict is usually a political and identity struggle which involves the relationship between minorities and majorities with Nation-States. Unlike, the Cartel's fight is not about revolutionary insurgencies, coercive policies, or identity, rather the expansion of economic power. However, Cartel's conflict shares some elements with ethnic struggles such as a cooperative or coercive relation with the State and the importance of defense or occupation of the territory.

<sup>32</sup> Lessing, 3.

Table 2. Conquest vs. Constrains

*Table 2 Conquest vs. Constrains*

			Proximate Aim of Fighting	
			'Conquest' (Expropriate / Replace Opponent)	'Constraint' (Change Opponent's Behavior)
Belligerent Dyads	Sub-National	State(s) vs. Domestic Non-State Actor (NSA)	<u>Revolutionary Insurgency</u>	<u>Cartel-State Conflict</u>
		Domestic NSA vs. Domestic NSA	<u>Inter-Cartel Turf War</u>	<u>Coercive Politics</u>
	Inter-National	State(s) vs. Foreign NSA	<u>Foreign Intervention</u>	<u>International Terrorism</u>
		State(s) vs. State(s)	<u>Interstate War</u>	<u>Coercive Diplomacy</u>

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Lessing explains that in the case of drug-related violence, there are two different fights, Cartels against the State and the fight between Cartels. As indicated in Table 2, the conflict between Cartels is to win the other's territory; hence the aim is a conquest. In the constraint scenario, Cartels fight the states to change the government outputs towards their criminal activities. In the next section, I describe the characteristics of the war on drugs in Mexico, contextualizing the process from domestic conflict, exogenous destabilization, and creating a regional security regime.

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<sup>33</sup> Lessing, 11.

#### 4.- Framing the drug-related conflict as a war

The authors presented above (Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne <sup>34</sup>; Buzan and Waever<sup>35</sup>, Lessing<sup>36</sup>) agree on how States frame a conflict have effects on the kind of intervention. In this regard, Lessing's claim about how framing the drug-related conflict as war resulted in its spread is fundamental to understanding the international dimension of this dispute. This idea is complemented by Carpenter, who states that when the issue is seen as an armed conflict, the frame—"civil war," "insurgency," "drug war"—shapes actors' understanding of the causes of violence, peace, and the role of the intervener, making specific actions possible while precluding others<sup>37</sup>.

The conflict involving drug organizations (Cartels) in Mexico, is characterized by struggles between Cartels and Cartels against the State. However, the idea of framing the conflict with Cartels as a war conflict was not an initiative of the Mexican State, but a policy transfer from the US; this argument will be explored and explained in the next section. This thesis draws attention to the fact that the war against drugs started in the US almost 40 years before the conflict between Cartels and Mexican territory. It was the US President Richard Nixon (1969-1974), who implemented the US police's military training to combat drug organizations. The war on drugs against Mexican cartels is the result of a *policy transfer* from the US and commercial and border agreements. This will be more relevant when showing the hegemonic level in the NC-A security regime.

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<sup>34</sup> Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of Civil Conflict Management."

<sup>35</sup> Buzan and Waever, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security."

<sup>36</sup> Lessing, "Logics of Violence in Criminal War."

<sup>37</sup> Carpenter, "Changing Lenses," 144.

In the next section, I develop an argument about the role of the hegemony in creating a regional security regime to contain drug trafficking in North-Central America.

## 5.- The context of the war on drugs in NC-A

International Organizations initially framed drug trafficking and production as a public State-health problem. Nonetheless, two events (Shanghai Conference of 1909 and the Harrison Act of 1914) propagated the idea of drug trafficking as a crime. In the American region, the modern idea of combatting drug trafficking as criminal activity is attributed to US President Richard Nixon. In his presidential campaign, he promised addressed to fight against drug trafficking in a *war on drugs*<sup>38</sup>. The war on drugs was formally launched in 1971, and two years later, President Nixon created the Office Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD). In 1981, the US implemented a military-grade training for anti-narcotic police; the enemies were Latin American traffickers in Southern Florida.

In 1947, the Mexican President Miguel Aleman created the Federal Direction of Security (DFS in Spanish). This department was endorsed by a US regional project called "Truman Doctrine of Soviet Containment," which aimed to combat communism's expansion in Latin America with *counterinsurgency police*. In response to the US government's pressure to control the drugs coming from Mexico to the US, the DFS was transformed into an antinarcotics force in 1971<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Benneyworth, "Narco Wars," 10.

<sup>39</sup> Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México*.

In 1989, the US war on drugs took on a regional dimension with President Bush, pointing out that the drugs' problem in the US was caused by the *source countries*<sup>40</sup>. Bush reactivated a counterinsurgency tactic by framing a new enemy, drug traffickers, and producers organized in international networks. In 1980, drug organizations reached much power. From these years were names such as Medellin and Cali's Cartels in Colombia and Guadalajara's Cartel in Mexico were pointed out as the most powerful criminal organizations in the American continent. Benneyworth mentions that the Clinton administration (1993-2001), boosted the antinarcotics strategy in Latin America, applying the militarization approach of Reagan, and the counterinsurgency strategy of Bush to combat the Drug Cartels. The first enemy was Medellin's, which controlled almost 80% of the cocaine market.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has been shaped by two projects that define the US antinarcotics policy towards Latin America, the Plan Colombia (2000-2015), and the Plan Mexico (popularly known as Merida Initiative-MI) implemented from 2008 and continuing until today. The main inflection point of the war on drugs in Mexico with the coincides with the start of Merida Initiative (2007-2008), a US anti-narcotic program that, through financial aid, has regionalized the war on drugs in the Mexican domestic conflict. The war against drug Cartels has resulted in the almost 250,000 drug-related homicides in the country, and Cartels' activities spillover around the all-region<sup>41</sup>

## Chapter . Case study: The Merida Initiative and the War on Drugs in North-Central-America

<sup>40</sup> Countries that produced and trafficked drugs such as Bolivia, Colombia, and Mexico.

<sup>41</sup> "The Globalization of Crime - A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment."

The Regional Security Regime in NC-A is focused on criminal organizations, particularly drug Cartels and criminal gangs. This empirical study of this thesis argues that the US, as a third-party actor, intervened in Mexico's drug-related conflict on two levels. First, exporting the framing of the drug conflict as a war to Mexico. Second, a financial program aid called the Merida Initiative aimed to improve the military capacity to combat drug cartels. I will now describe the effects of US intervention in the drug-related conflict in Mexico.

## Methodology

The empirical study is developed in two parts. First, I present maps of conflict in Mexico and Central America<sup>42</sup> (NC-A). The dependent variable is organized violence events<sup>43</sup>. The independent variable is three phases of the US external intervention in Mexico through antinarcotics funds. The phases are the following.

*Table 3 Three phases of US intervention*

<b>The regional security regime towards drugs in Mexico</b>	
Stage I: The birth of the war on drugs in Mexico	2001-2007

<sup>42</sup>'s triangle with the absence of El Salvador, as I will explain this in the methodological section.

<sup>43</sup> The incidence of the use of armed force by an organized actor against another organized actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least one direct death in either the best, low or high estimate categories at a specific location and for a specific temporal duration (Sundberg and Melander, 2013), in Allansson, "Methodology - Department of Peace and Conflict Research - Uppsala University, Sweden."

Stage II: Intervention program: Merida Initiative (exogenous destabilization)	2008-2010
Stage III: Beyond Merida (exogenous stabilization)	2011-2015

The time frame was chosen to assess the impact of different levels of nested security on the conflict:

**Stage I:** After more than 70 years of a single-party government, in 2000 was elected a new party (National Action Party). What characterized this new administration was the rupture of some pacts between the government and criminal organizations<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, the swift coincides with the Bush government (2001-2009) and his project of regionalizing the war on drugs in the NC-A area. It is in this stage where I locate the domestic destabilization.

**Stage II-**Beginning of Merida Initiative: In 2008, the US financial program known as the Merida Initiative was implemented to help the local government (Calderón) in the fight against the Drug Cartels. It is in this stage where I locate the exogenous destabilization.

**Stage III:** 2011 represented a critical change in the MI approach by President Barack Obama (2009-2017). Beyond Merida tried to promote a more community-resilience, rather than military approach. It is in this stage where I locate the exogenous stabilization.

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<sup>44</sup>. As Castellanos describes, the creation of Cartel's power in Mexico was due to the collaboration with the political system. These statements were sustained in the collaboration of the DFS and the Guadalajara's Cartel. Also, the trial against the brother of President Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994).

The data were extracted from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), a repository for academic research. It offers information on organized violence events from 1975 to date from almost every country. The data can be subsetted through filters of year, type of event, actors, among other variables, and it offers georeferenced information to create maps. From UCDP, I extracted all the information related to conflict name, dyad<sup>45</sup>, year, location, and the number of homicides. The chosen actors are regional Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs, mainly drug Cartels in Mexico), and the governments. The maps were created in the ArcGis software<sup>46</sup>, illustrating the location and dimension of conflicts in Mexico, and the regional spillover of the conflict through the triangle, in the three phases. As MI initially incorporated Central America, I included Guatemala and Honduras to show the conflict's spillover.

The UCDP does not provide information about conflicts in El Salvador after 1994; hence, it is not included. The second reason for El Salvador's exclusion is the presence of local VNSAs, the criminal gangs' Mara 13, and Mara 18. These VNSAs require complete work to explain their origin and their correlation with other US programs. I indicate the presence of gang-related violence when they are in Guatemala and Honduras, due to the reports that highlight an association between gangs and Mexican Cartels in those countries. Using the maps, I aim to show how the US financial aid influenced the spread and led to the escalation of the conflict in Mexico and Central America

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<sup>45</sup>. The two actors that are in conflict.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.arcgis.com/index.html>

## 1.- Exogenous intervention can result in regional destabilization.

To demonstrate the presence of US antinarcotics programs in Mexico's previous MI, I construct a table of US financial aid coming from the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense between 2001 to 2017. This matrix is divided into the three phases outlined above, and it will test two of the initial hypotheses

1.- Merida Initiative is not the beginning of the US foreign intervention on counternarcotics programs; however, MI generated conditions of nested insecurity without precedent.

2.- Framing drug-related conflict as a *war* resulted in the increase of violence and the spread of conflict around the region.

MI is a US program that initially provided guns and military technology to the Mexican army in the fight against drug Cartels. It was launched in 2008 by President Bush and President Calderón. In its first version, MI included the Central American countries, but, in 2010, the US created a particular program for those countries called the Central American Security Regime Initiative (CARSI). Furthermore, in 2010 MI switched its approach from military capacity-building to institutional strengthening. MI is conventionally treated as the beginning of the war on drugs from the US-Mexican front against the Cartels. However, I show evidence of US antinarcotics programs before MI.

US intervention is presented in three phases. Previous MI (2001-constitution of the war on drugs); MI application (2008- the materialization of the war on drugs); and *Beyond Merida* (2010-the new approach of the war on drugs).

## 1.1 Some prior clarifications of the RSR in the American continent

In the American continent, the regional security regime is mostly managed by the American States Organization. There are some debates around the role of the OAS as a counterweight to the US hegemony. Carranza<sup>47</sup> presents some potential arguments about the hegemonic status of the US in the region after 2001. With the rise of the BRICS bloc and the so-called *pink tide* in Latin America<sup>48</sup>, the hegemonic status of the US was put in check after 2005. However, nowadays, in the American continent and regionally in Latin America, there is a lack of real opposition to US foreign policy. The reality is that the war on drugs' project addressed by Nixon in 1968 has been continued in North Central America, and the OAS opposition to this intervention remained at the discursive level<sup>49</sup>. Some voices (such as the case of the Latin American chapter of the Global Commission on drug policy) have been demanding a change in the drug policies' approach. However, the reality is that the war on drugs' strategy in the region is still unidirectional and managed by the US.

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<sup>47</sup> Carranza, "Reality Check."

<sup>48</sup> The *turn left* in Latin American governments that resulted in opposition to the US commerce project "Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)" by the *socialist block* lead by Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil.

<sup>49</sup> "The OAS Position on Drugs."

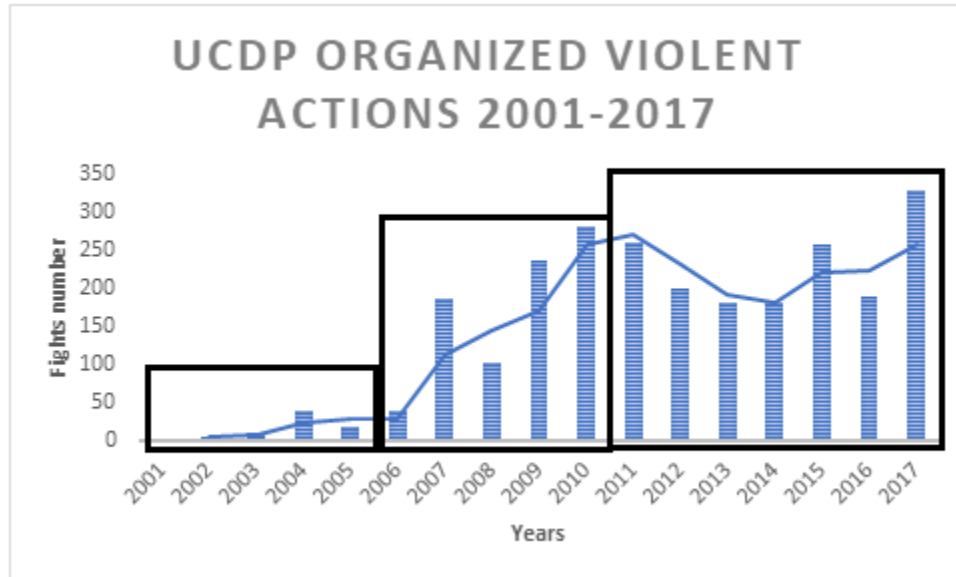


Chart 2 Organized violence Events <sup>50</sup>

Chart 2 shows the number of armed conflicts registered by UCDP, divided into three phases. In the next section, I present the three phases of the war on drugs in Mexico under the following structure. I describe each stage's historical background and portray the geographical incidence of organized violence<sup>51</sup>. In these maps, I include Guatemala and Honduras to demonstrate the spillover's effects of MI in Central America<sup>52</sup>. This chronological scheme's central point is to indicate how three different interventions in the US antinarcotics program affected the conflict's spillover. The maps demonstrate the distribution of organized violence in the three phases mentioned above.

<sup>50</sup> "UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program."

<sup>51</sup> DYAD: VNSA vs. VNSA; and VNSA vs. states.

<sup>52</sup> El Salvador is not included in these maps due to the lack of information about this country in the UCDP database. I will show the effects of MI in El Salvador in separate maps of conflict.

## 2.- The birth of the war on drugs (2001-2005)

As I described in the war on drugs' history, the MI has its roots in International conferences from 1909 and 1914<sup>53</sup> that changed the approach of drug-related conflict from a health issue to a criminal one. After the implementation of military training for antinarcotics police, and the importation of this police model to Mexico through the Federal Direction of Security (DFS) in 1971, the war on drugs was regionalized. The first stage starts in 2001 regarding the following events. After the terrorist attacks in New York on September 9, 2001, the US administration was worried about terrorism entering to the US through the borders. It is for this reason that the country members of the North-American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA<sup>54</sup>) launched the project called the Security and Prosperity Partnership-SPP.

Carlsen<sup>55</sup> argues that by justifying an attempt to protect NAFTA countries from terrorist attacks and other VNSAs. The three-member countries (with Bush Jr., Vicente Fox, Brian Mulroney representing the US, Mexico, and Canada, respectively) launched the SPP in 2005, a project of regional defense<sup>56</sup> that aimed to protect the US borders from terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, SPP was also directed to other threats that, according to the US, represented another danger to the US, one noted in drug organizations (drug Cartels), and migration. Canada and Mexico adopted US security concerns as their own, and through a policy transfer from the US, the Bush agenda was adopted domestically. As Carlsen mentions

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<sup>53</sup> The Shanghai Conference in 1909, and the Harrison Act of 1914 explained in Benneyworth, "Narco Wars," 10.

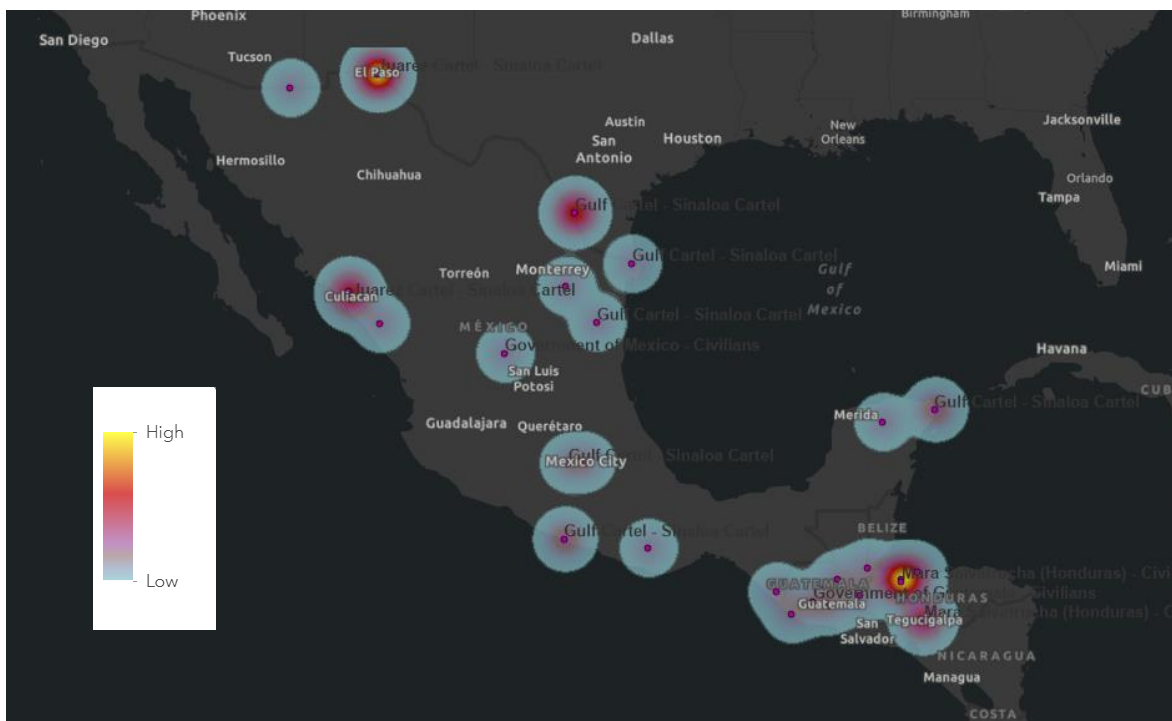
<sup>54</sup> A commercial agreement signed by Mexico, the US, and Canada, signed in 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Carlsen, "Armoring NAFTA."

<sup>56</sup> Carlsen.

Given the considerable imbalance of economic and political power between Mexico and the United States, Mexico had to under adopt the foreign policy objectives and the destabilizing, militaristic counterterrorism agenda of the US government.<sup>57</sup>

*Map 1 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America between 2001 and 2004.<sup>58</sup>*



*Note.* It shows the location of struggles between 2001 and 2004. According to the UCDP, there were 52 fights; 28% were in Honduras and Guatemala between criminal gangs and gangs against the government.

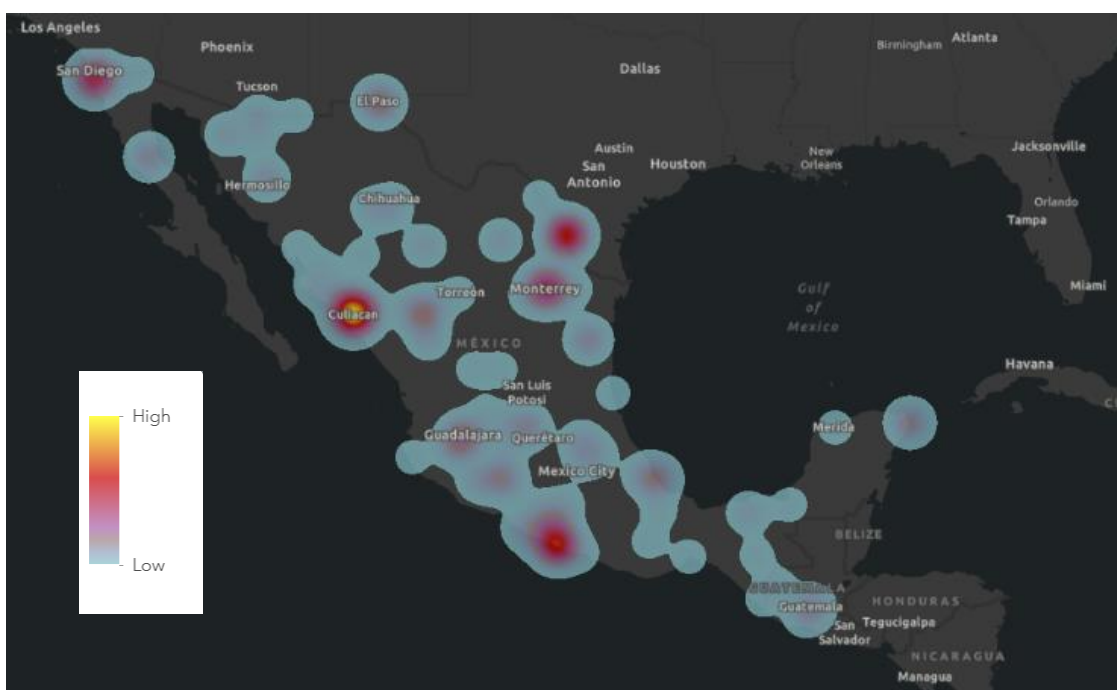
Regarding the SPP compromise, the Mexican President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) incorporated the regional agreement into a domestic project, launching in 2005 the program "Mexico Seguro" (Mexico Safe), designed to protect the northern and south border of Mexico, using of the national army to combat drug cartels. This process was known as the

<sup>57</sup> Carlsen, 3.

<sup>58</sup> "UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program."

militarization of public security<sup>59</sup>. Between 2005 and 2006, the military was deployed to some zones of the country, principally to Michoacán and Guerrero on the west coast of the country.

Map 2 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America between 2005 and 2007.



*Note.* It shows the location of struggles between 2001 and 2004. According to the UCDP, there were 52 fights; 28% were in Honduras and Guatemala between criminal gangs and gangs against the government.

One year after SPP implementation, the new President Felipe Calderon (2006-2012)<sup>60</sup> took Mexico Seguro to the next level, declaring the war against drug Mexican Cartels in 2006. Although it was Calderon who publicly declared the war, the SPP demonstrates that this

<sup>59</sup> Vargas, "6 Las Fuerzas Armadas en las calles."

<sup>60</sup> Coming from the same party, PAN (National Action Party) of the right ideology.

framing of drug-related conflict as a war was part of a regional plan. The Calderon's war materialized one of the three Bush SPP policies, the war on drugs<sup>61</sup>.

### 3.- Merida Initiative. The materialization of the war on drugs in NC-A (2006 to 2010)

Although the war on drugs in Mexico was part of a regional project, it is essential to mention that it was Calderon who asked for aid to the US. The petition resulted in a program that provided 1,400 million dollars for the next three years to Mexico, formally known as Plan Mexico (Merida Initiative-MI). MI featured a military approach. As demonstrated by the CSR report

During the first three years of the Mérida Initiative, Congress appropriated some \$1.5 billion, including \$420.7 million in foreign military financing (FMF), which enabled the purchase of equipment, including aircraft and helicopters support Mexico's federal security forces (military and police). Congress withheld 15% of specific US aid for the Mexican military and police until the State Department submitted an annual report stating that Mexico was taking steps to meet human rights requirements. US assistance focused on (1) counternarcotics, border security, and counterterrorism; (2) public security; and (3) institution building.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Carlsen, "Armoring NAFTA," 5.

<sup>62</sup> Seelke, "Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2020," 1.

Map 3 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America between 2008 and 2009



Note. 1 It shows a spatial reduction of the conflict in the region, and the events' distribution looks contained. However, events were reduced in MI's implementation year, but in 2009 they increased by almost 40% respect to 2005-2007. Regarding the number of events, this map represents that the combats were concentrated in a reduced space (previous respect years) but with higher lethality.

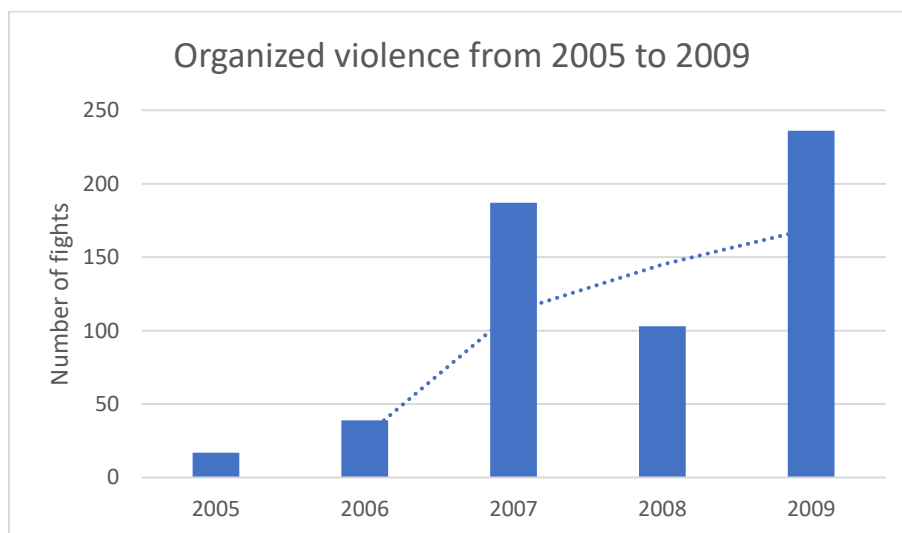
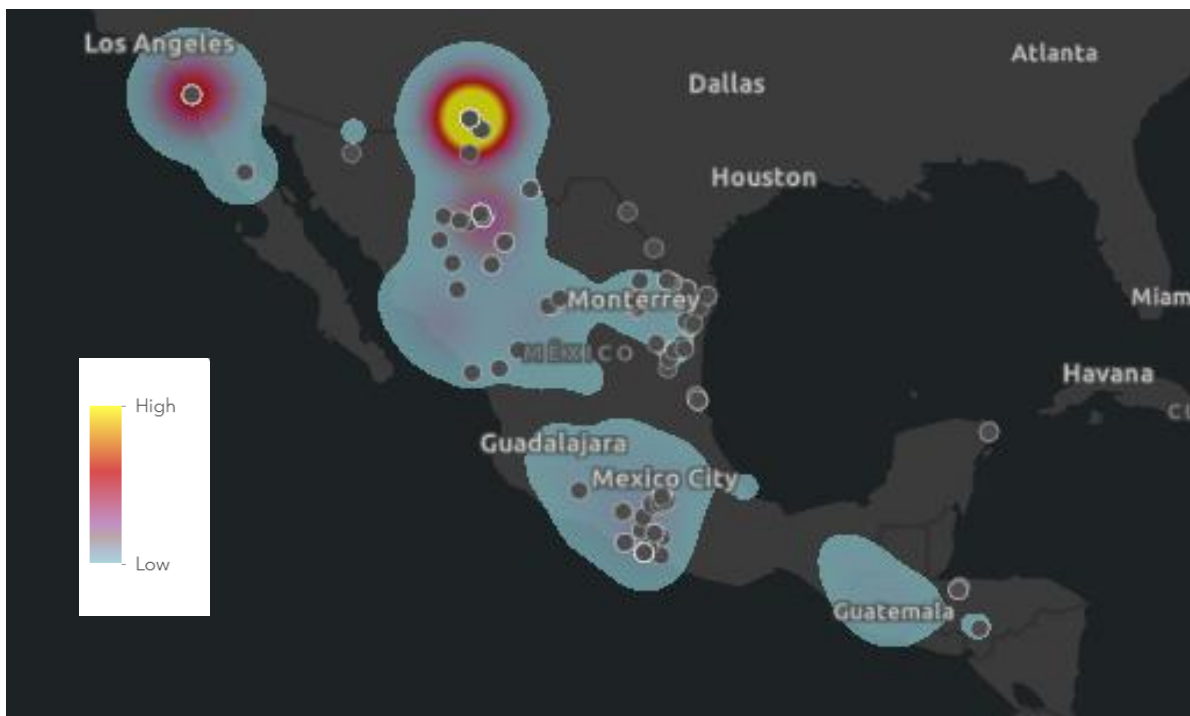


Chart 3 Organized violence events 2005-2009

The CSR report highlights that MI's main contributions came from the Department of Defense (DOD) between 2008 and 2010. The DOD and the Department of the State (DOS) administrated funds for antinarcotic activities to Mexico for many years before MI. What changed with MI implementation in 2008 were two factors, 1) a large amount of the funds were dedicated to the military improvement of antinarcotics programs, and 2) the participation of a new fund called the Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Before 2008, there are not registers about FMF in funds to Mexico, as I will demonstrate later.

### Map 3. The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America in 2010

*Map 4 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America in 2010*



*Note. 2010 is the most relevant year because three fundamental drivers related to NS overlap at this time. It was the FY with the highest amount of money (639 m), and more than 30% was backed by the Foreign Military Financing program, as is showed in the chart 4*

In 2010, a spike in US aid for the drug war corresponded with an escalation and spread of conflict (with Mexican Cartels in Central America). 2010 is the biggest expend in the history

of antinarcotics, and particularly the FMF participation. According to Milenio, and the UNODC, 2010 registered the highest organized-crime related homicides between 2001 and 2016 . Furthermore, this year illustrates the first violent events of Mexican Cartels in Central American territory. In April, a fight between Sinaloa and Gulf Cartel was registered in Honduras. In May, Los Zetas assassinated 21 civilians in Guatemala. Finally, in November, another fight was attributed to Los Zetas in the Department of Petén, Guatemala.

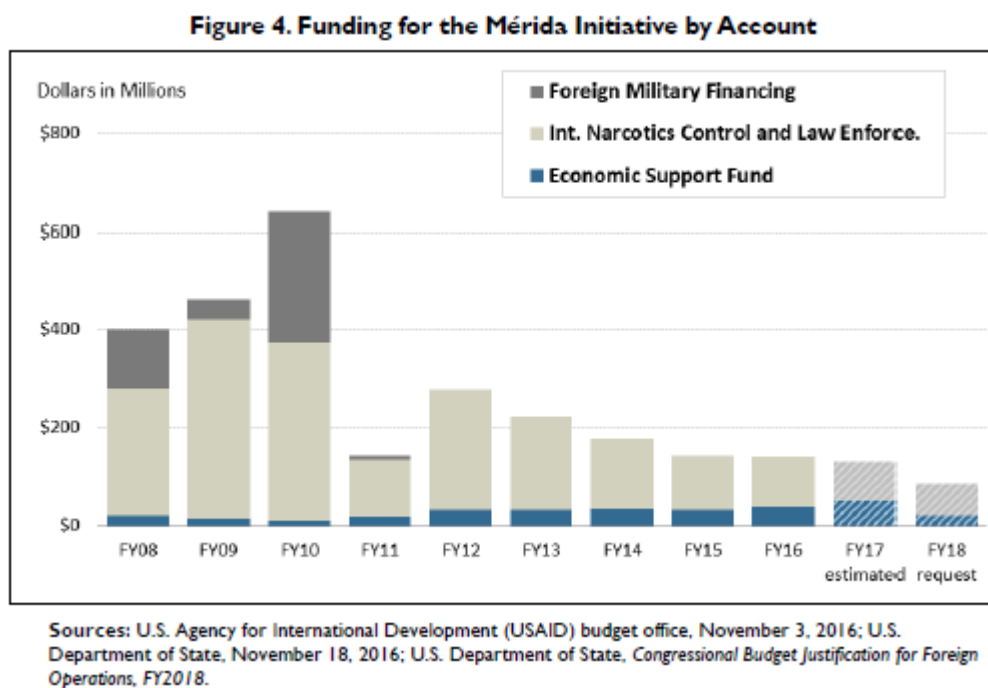


Chart 4 Funding MI by program

Regarding Bagley and Rosen highlight some relevant points regarding 2010

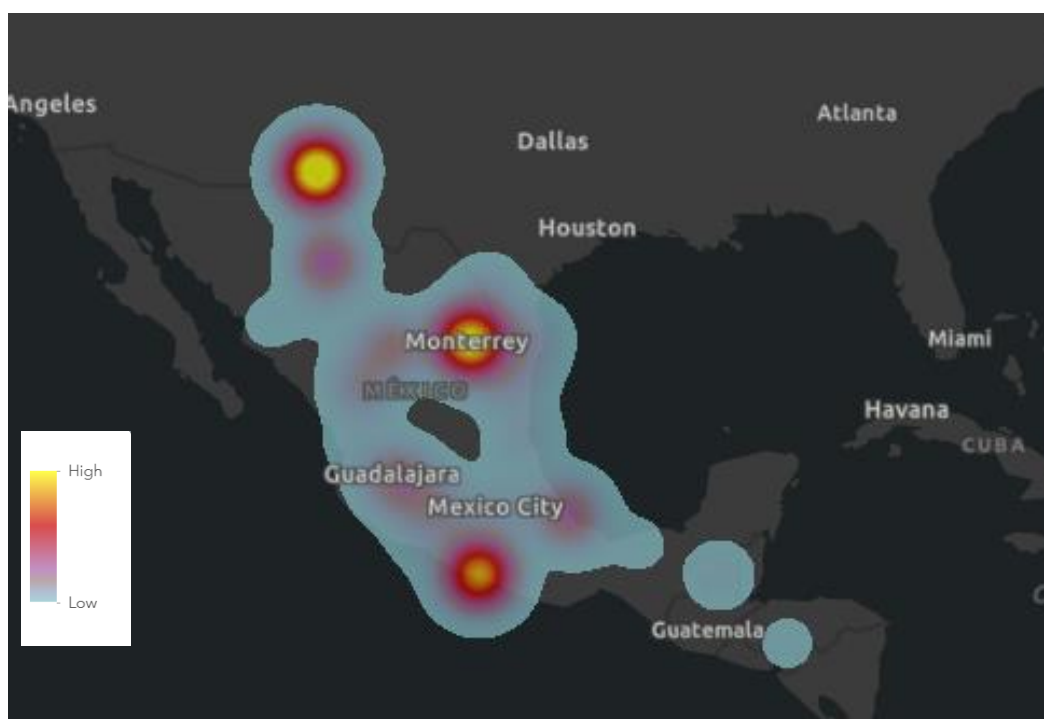
Paradoxically, the presence of cartels in Central America is possibly a result of the MI and Calderón's strategy, which resulted in the "balloon" and "cockroach" effects. The cockroach effect occurs when a government attempts to eliminate or fragment organized crime, leading the criminal organizations to move into and operate in the weakest neighboring states. This effect is associated with the Zetas' and Sinaloa Cartels' spreading to Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, and Panama.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Bagley and Rosen, *Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in the Americas Today*, 249.

#### 4.- Beyond Merida. The exogenous stabilization (2011-2017).

With the beginning of Obama's administration, the paradigm of antinarcotics aid changed. After some assessments of MI results, the relationship between the program and the increase of violence, conflict spillover, and corruption in Mexico was proved. Furthermore, there were accusations of human rights violations, murders, and abuse of power by the Mexican army. Hence, the US Congress designed a new project, called *Beyond Merida*. In 2011 the MI resources decreased due to the US government's decision to make these resources conditional upon Mexico's fulfillment of the human rights standards. They also reconsidered the military approach of MI.

Map 5 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America in 2011

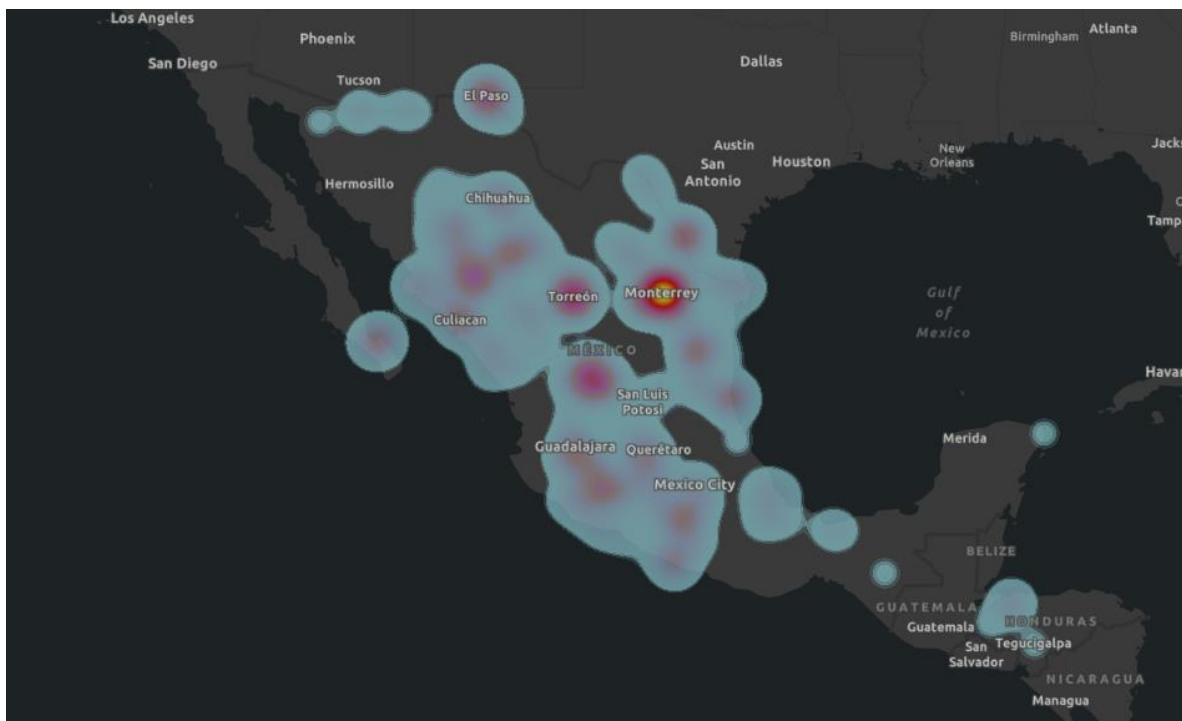


*Note. 2011 shows a high spread of events and an essential increase in Guatemala and Honduras. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the shifts in antinarcotic program funds have a visible effect until the next year. In this case, the paradigm change of Beyond Merida revealed effects until 2012.*

In 2011, the Obama administration suggested to the congress the reconsideration of the MI pillars and a new focus.

In the US and Mexican governments broadened the scope of bilateral efforts under four pillars that prioritized institution building: 1.- combating transnational criminal organizations through intelligence sharing and law enforcement operations; 2. Institutionalizing the rule of law while protecting human rights through justice sector reform, forensic equipment and training, and federal- and state-level police and corrections reform; 3. To create a 21st-century U.S.-Mexican border while improving immigration enforcement in Mexico and security along Mexico's southern borders; and 4. Building strong and resilient communities by piloting approaches to address the root causes of violence and supporting efforts to reduce drug demand and build a "culture of lawfulness" through education programs.<sup>64</sup>

*Map 6 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central America between 2012 and 2014*



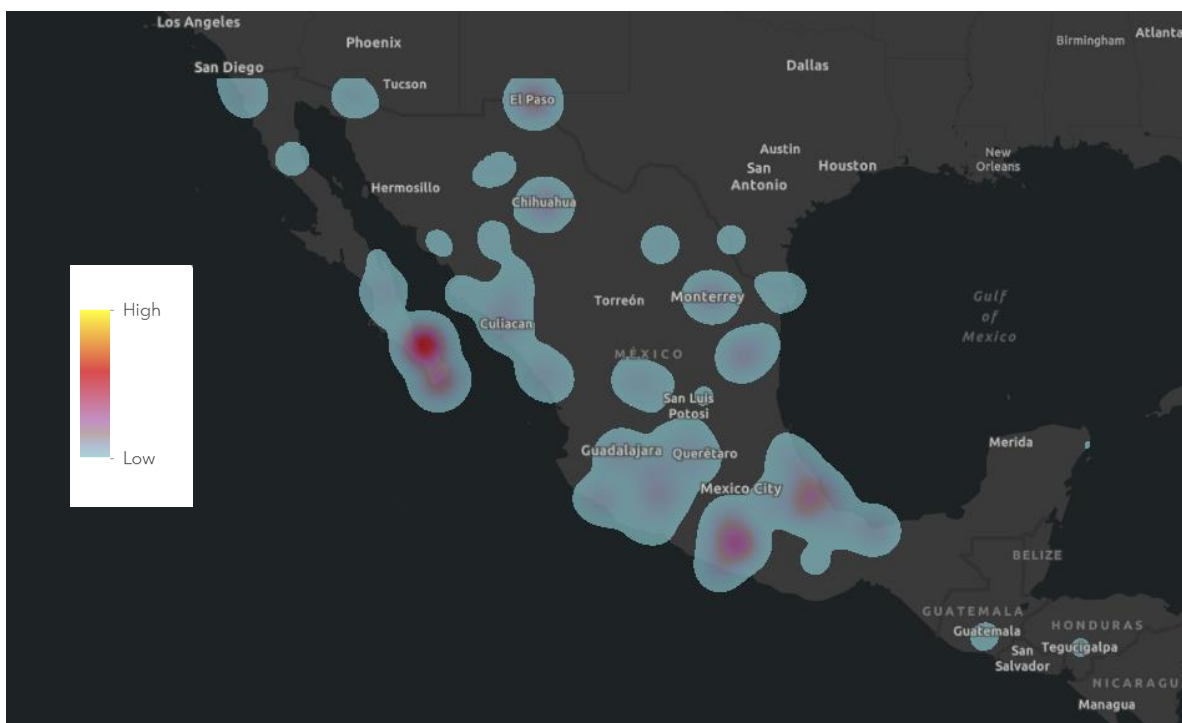
*Note. Even though the change of paradigm between 2010-2011, the conflict was broadly spread. It decreased respect to 2010; however, the effects of the military strategy called “kingpin” ( ) ( ) divided the cartels medium and small organization disputing the turf for production and distribution. However, the number of events decreased with respect to 2011.*

<sup>64</sup> Seelke, “Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2020,” 1.

Starting in 2011, the FMF was no longer part of the MI; however, the Departments of State and Defense kept the military assistance.<sup>65</sup> Carpenter claims that in recognition of the violence provoked by a mainly militaristic approach, the paradigm shifts toward institution building.

While most of the US funding in the first phase of the Mérida Initiative went to buying expensive equipment, a series of revisions in "Beyond Mérida" shifted the focus toward institution building. Whereas the original Mérida plan aimed to dismantle the major criminal organizations, improve border control (land, air, and sea), improve the justice system, and restrict gang activity, the new strategy focused on disrupting organized criminal groups, institutionalizing the rule of law, building a twenty-first-century border, and building strong and resilient communities.<sup>66</sup>

*Map 7 The concentration of organized violence in Mexico and Central*



*Note. The map shows a new stage of concentration of the conflict. However, some elements should be considered. First, exploring through the maps can be noted by the displacement of these red points across the country and how, in general, the conflict grew and retracted in different zones.*

<sup>65</sup> Carpenter, "Changing Lenses."

<sup>66</sup> Carpenter, 141.

Nevertheless, Carpenter confirms that the paradigm shift was mainly at a discursive level. Even after 2011, most of the financial aid was applied to the enforcement of military agencies.

Of the \$346 million requested in the President's FY2011 foreign assistance budget for Mexico, only 0.6 percent (\$2.3 million) funded education, and just 6 percent (\$21 million) was allocated toward development assistance (Department of State 2010b, 728). [...] 84 percent (or \$292 million) was allocated to International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INCLE), which manages these programs, and an additional \$9.1 million was allocated for training and assistance to the Mexican military.<sup>67</sup>

As presented in map 7 and chart 5, after 2010, the spread of events decreased respect to 2010-2014. The change that represented *beyond Merida* had a positive effect on conflict reduction.

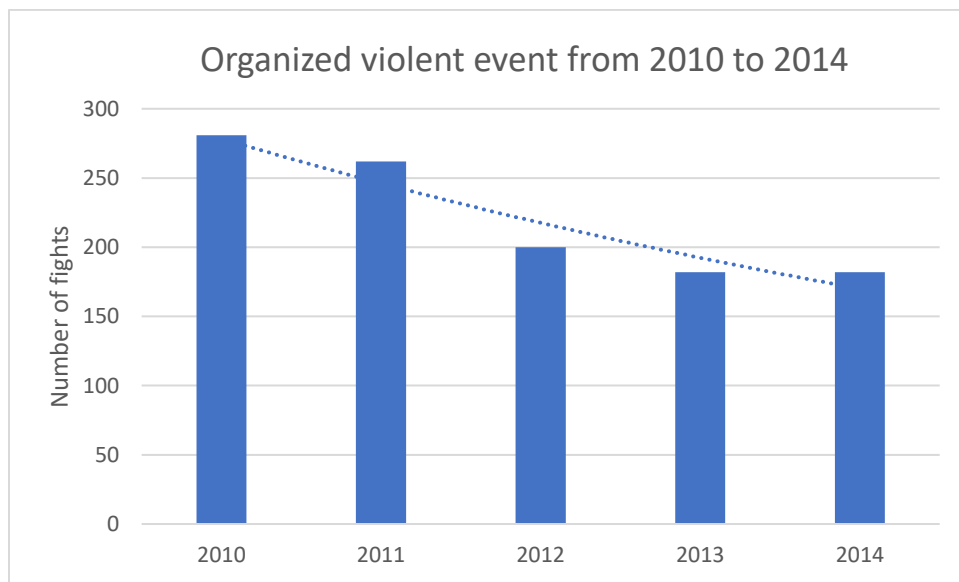


Chart 5 Violent events 2010-2014

<sup>67</sup> Carpenter, "Changing Lenses," 142.

Nonetheless, the military approach of MI and Beyond Merida continued in other programs, and as I demonstrate in the next section, after 2015, the violent events and organized crime-related homicides increased, reaching the historical maximum in 2017.

## Chapter. The Nested Security analysis of the Merida Initiative

### 1.- Exogenous destabilization. From the US antinarcotics programs to Merida Initiative

Jenne states that mediators “sometimes try to neutralize or exogenously stabilize conflict dynamics in the neighborhood by recruiting powerful states or international organizations to broker a pact between the rival states.”<sup>68</sup> The US plays a role as an external participant in the war on drugs in Mexico and as regional hegemony. In the drugs war, the rules of the security regime are primarily determined by the US as the regional hegemony. Regarding this, I argue that the US, as an external actor, exacerbated existing conflict between Cartels and Cartels and the State by providing military aid in antinarcotics programs. To demonstrate this claim, I show a table with the antinarcotic financial aid to Mexico from 2001 to 2007.

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<sup>68</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*, 31.

Table 4 Antinarcotic funding from the US to Mexico (2001-2017)

FY	ESF	INCLE/DOS	FMF/DOD	DI&DCA/DOD	TOTAL_FY	Homicides Rate
<b>2000</b>	21866871	4071000		18424000	44361871	10.7
<b>2001</b>	28222884	10000000		21606000	59828884	10.2
<b>2002</b>	51912196	37000000		18304000	107216196	9.8
<b>2003</b>	25655000	12000000		13667000	51322000	9.7
<b>2004</b>	47493000	38280546		9713000	95486546	8.9
<b>2005</b>	49382000	41906669		9650000	100938669	9.3
<b>2006</b>	50850000	119434061		15166000	185450061	9.7
<b>2007</b>	54547000	36878609		15508000	106933609	8.1
<b>2008</b>	186401529	2387356		12171000	200959885	12.7
<b>2009</b>	736353580	350523617	33150000	34164000	1121041197	17.7
<b>2010</b>	<b>271339646</b>	<b>531724609</b>	<b>5250000</b>	<b>89749000</b>	<b>892813255</b>	<b>22.7</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>215696977</b>	<b>253932717</b>	<b>7984000</b>	<b>84690000</b>	<b>562303694</b>	<b>23.7</b>
<b>2012</b>	332243296	27536458	7000000	83464000	450243754	22.0
<b>2013</b>	271572000	242486800	6646012	63328000	584032812	19.0
<b>2014</b>	197520980	227394753	6550000	43108000	474573733	17.0
<b>2015</b>	168530234	456135015	4674999	43911000	673251248	17.0
<b>2016</b>	82218979	0	7000000	58979	89277958	20.0
<b>2017</b>	143806000	166988249	5000000	44489000	360283249	26.0
<b>2018</b>					6160318621	29.0 <sup>69</sup>

Sources: USAID foreign aid explorer . The homicide rates were extracted from the UNODC homicide database (2000-2006), and Statista report of organized crime-related homicides (2007-2015) Notes: FY= Fiscal Year. ESF = Economic Support Fund; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; FMF = Foreign Military Financing. DOD= Department of Defense. DOS= Department of State. -DI&DCA/DOD: Department of Defense, Drug Interdiction, and Counter-Drug Activities..

<sup>69</sup> The data was obtained from the USAID web site and was filtered just to antinarcotic programs. <https://explorer.usaid.gov/>

### 1.1.- Findings

Looking at the Data in the USAID, I found that almost every agency funding Merida Initiative (Anti-Narcotics program, Economic Support Fund, Drug Interdiction sponsored by the Department of State and Department of Defense, mainly) already existed before the implementation of the MI in 2007-2008. The Anti-Narcotics program (FYDA onwards) has registered from 1996. Most of the studies about MI compare the effects of the war on drugs just from 2008-to present. I checked the data before 2008 under the argument that the war on drugs started many years before MI. A probable correlation between the MI implementation in 2008 and the increase in homicide rate (from 8.1 to 12.7) can be argued. Most of the studies mentioned above highlight the MI as a critical destabilizing factor (through antinarcotics aid) in drug-related conflict. Nonetheless, I argue the key in destabilization of the conflict in Mexico is not the increase of antinarcotics funds in 2008-MI. The driver of destabilization was the decision to transmit most of the antinarcotics' resources to the army. This event escalated domestic tensions, particularly after the declaration of war against Cartels by President Calderon in 2006. I call this action the *domestic legitimization of external intervention*.

The Cartels used to have a deal with the government. Some of them received protection from police, as the former director of the national police department declared in a trial in the US<sup>70</sup>. With the declaration of war, the Cartels looked through provincial governors for local protection in the State and municipal police against the Mexican army. With all the economic

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<sup>70</sup> "The Comandante."

power and the rule *silver or lead*<sup>71</sup>, The Cartels created their private militias. Former police bodies and militaries integrated some of these private militias. The most famous case is *Los Zetas*, an elite military body with US training, which was recruited by the Gulf Cartel. As a consequence of the war on drugs, the Gulf Cartel was divided, and Los Zetas formed their own Cartel. This Cartel is the bloodiest and dangerous according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the responsibility of attacks to civilians in Guatemala and Honduras.

The second case is the Sinaloa Cartels' private militia, created to combat Los Zetas' influence. After the capture of Sinaloa's Drug Lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the militia got the independence from Sinaloa and created the Jalisco Cartel New Generation. Currently, this Cartel is disputing the US market to the Sinaloa's Cartel<sup>72</sup>. Providing military technology and guns and leveling the balance of the government (and the army) over the cartels, destabilized and regionalized the conflict. This intervention achieved the level of destabilization once that the domestic actor legitimized the external intervention.

## 2.- External intervention and domestic legitimation

I argue that the inflection point is when the declaration of war against cartels in 2006 matches MI implementation. This is corroborated when the militarization of the country matches the increase of funds in MI in 2010.

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<sup>71</sup> Phrase from Pablo Escobar, it refers to the pressure to police and politicians to cooperate with Cartels or be murdered.

<sup>72</sup>. All this information can be corroborated in Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México*. Bagley and Rosen, *Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in the Americas Today*; and Jackson, "Why designating Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations ease the prosecution of drug traffickers under the narcoterrorism statute."

**Table 2.3** Nested security hypotheses

1. Destabilization	————→	Nested insecurity
Variant A: <i>If the minority is leveraged, the domestic conflict is likely to escalate as the leveraged minority mobilizes to obtain concessions from the center.</i>		
Variant B: <i>If the majority is leveraged, the domestic conflict is likely to escalate as the leveraged majority seeks to gain ground against a restive minority.</i>		

Regarding the destabilization process Jenne<sup>73</sup> states that the external environment "may be destabilized at any time because of power shifts or events on the regional or systemic level, creating a condition of nested insecurity". From the two variants of destabilization, the war on drugs and MI are explained by the variant b. The US, as a hegemonic power, create the MI to regionalize the war on drugs. Once that the war on drugs started domestically, the conflict was destabilized.

However, this claim about variant b is incomplete insofar that is seen unilaterally. The antinarcotics programs from the US to Mexico existed years before MI. While these programs were not more extensive than MI, they attempt to intervene financially in the conflict. However, the conflict remained nested, and the homicide rates stay stable, although the increase or decrease of antinarcotics aid previous MI. In this regard, I argue *that regional destabilization cannot be caused by exogenous actors unless there is a domestic legitimation. When the domestic majority (in this case, the government) legitimated the exogenous intervention, the conflict is destabilized.*

While this affirmation looks obvious, there is systemic connotation. The external actor, even a hegemony, tries to intervene in the domestic drug conflict in Mexico for many years; however, without domestic legitimation, this intervention is not achieved. As indicated in table 4, from 2000 to 2005, the DOD and DOS funded antinarcotics programs. These

<sup>73</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*.

programs did not affect the absolute numbers of homicides and organized violence events in the country, as showed in graphic 3 and 1.



Chart 6 Homicide rates in Mexico from 2000 to 2018<sup>74</sup>

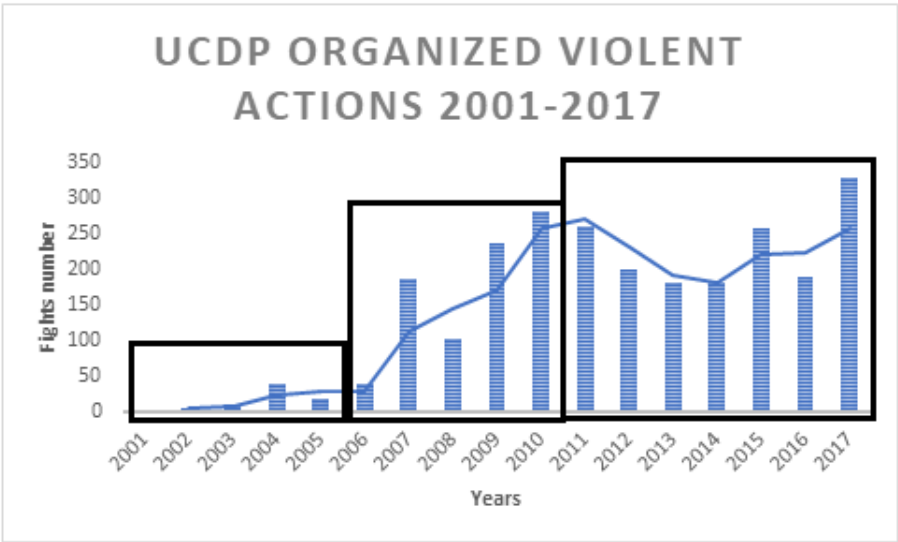


Chart 7 Organized violence events 2001-2017

<sup>74</sup> Based on statista “Number of Organized-Crime Style Homicides in Mexico 2018.” and Milenio data “Impone 2018 Marca Histórica Con 15 Mil 877 Homicidios.”.

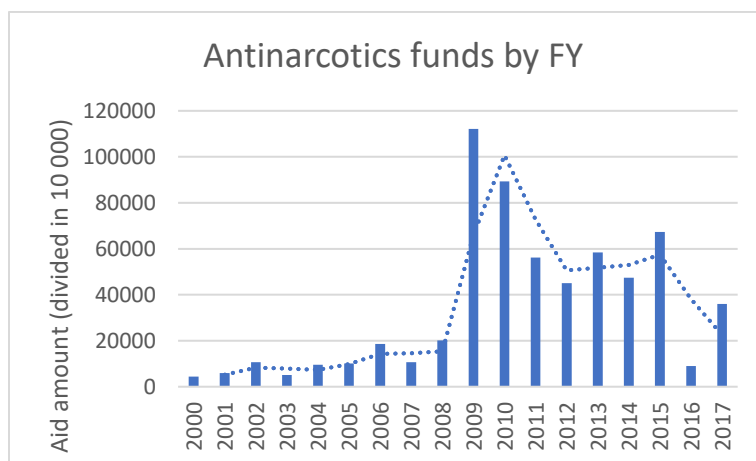


Chart 8 Antinarcotics programs by Fiscal Year 2001-2017

Hence, the exogenous intervention did not result in conflicts destabilization until the domestic actor legitimated it in power. When these elements match, the conflict escalates and cannot be nested withdrawing or reducing the external intervention, as the years 2015 to 2017 demonstrate.

#### 4.- Conflict beyond the borders and transborder diaspora "

As explained in the SPP constitution, the creation of a regional security program in North America responded to the terrorist threat and included migration and drug trafficking. The initial argument for launching an antinarcotic program using military forces was to protect the US borders from terrorism and organized crime. However, MI resulted in a displacement of the conflict to the Central American countries.

Map 8. Increase of Cartels presence from 2001-2017

<b>Dataset_complete</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Juarez Cartel - Sinaloa Cartel</li> <li>Gulf Cartel - Los Zetas</li> <li>Gulf Cartel - Sinaloa Cartel</li> <li>Jalisco Cartel New Generation - Sinaloa Cartel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jalisco Cartel New Generation - Los Zetas</li> <li>Sinaloa Cartel - Tijuana Cartel</li> <li>Los Zetas - Sinaloa Cartel</li> <li>Beltrón Leyva Cartel - Sinaloa Cartel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tijuana Cartel - Tijuana Cartel - El Teo faction</li> <li>Jalisco Cartel New Generation - Los Caballeros Templarios</li> <li>Other</li> </ul>
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2001-2004



2005-2007



2008-2009



2010-2011



2011-2014



2015-2017



The maps show the presence of VNSAs in NCA. There are two relevant elements to them—first, the exponential increase from big cartels to medium and small organizations. Second, the expansion throughout the entire territory. 2011-2014 indicates a high diversification and expansion, although in those years the violence decreased. The kingpin strategy can explain this effect. When a drug lord is captured and extradited to the US, the Cartels are divided into two or three smaller. The sub-leaders fight among themselves for turf control (violent stage), and once that there is territorial delimitation, the violence stop for moments. Eventually, they fight to increase their space of influence, and the violence rises again. This effect is observed in the comparison between the left and right maps.

5.- Bilateral conflicts between the host state and another state in the region can significantly fuel internal disputes.

Jenne observes that most domestic conflicts are “exacerbated or prolonged by conflicts or actors at the regional level”<sup>75</sup>. In the same way, the war on drugs in NC-A has aggravated domestic conflicts in NC-A. This can be seen in the connection between North and Central American gangs with Cartels. The war on drugs drove the Cartels to look for alliances with other VNSAs in the region. Such was the case of Los Zetas collaborating with the Salvadorian criminal gang “mara-18”<sup>76</sup>. Other examples are described by Tapia<sup>77</sup>, including the alliance between US gangs and Cartels members in US prisons. The VNSA-State conflict that features indirect intervention of the hegemonic power has resulted in the VNSA's

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<sup>75</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> González, “La migración centroamericana en su tránsito por México hacia los Estados Unidos.”

<sup>77</sup> Tapia, Sparks, and Miller, “Texas Latino Prison Gangs.”

spreading to other places, looking for weak governments and corruptible societies, such as the case of Mexican Cartels presence in Guatemala and Honduras<sup>78</sup>.

The NS model shows that regional stabilization before or during the exogenous intervention is fundamental to nest a conflict. This thesis illustrates that MI and the other programs to create a security regime in NC-A never aim to stabilize the region; instead, they just attempt to combat the VNSA. This claim is sustained in the military expenditure rather than a more social approach as in *beyond Merida*. Now, countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (among others) must deal not just with gangs, but its alliance with drug Cartels<sup>79</sup>. As mentioned at the beginning, NS demonstrates three levels of conflict, domestic, regional, and systemic. For the VNSA-State conflict in Mexico, it is portrayed in the following way:

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<sup>78</sup> "Corridor of Violence."

<sup>79</sup> "Situation of Human Rights in Mexico."

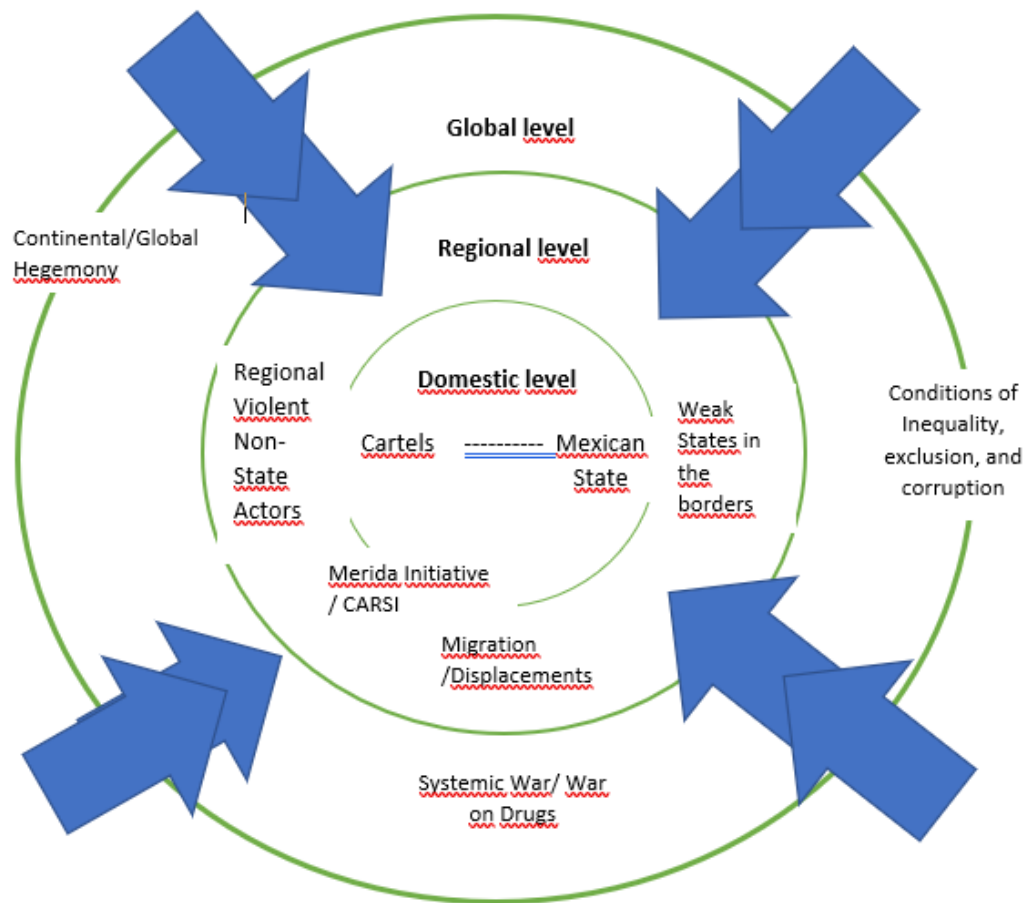


Figure 2 Nested Security Model of the War on Drugs

Note. 3. For the original model, check Nested Security, 2015:33

The fight between Cartels and the Mexican State represents the domestic level. Although they are the main actors at the local level, I explained the complexity of Cartels-State relations' history in the preceding section. Furthermore, the army's lack of accountability resulted in a humanitarian crisis of *collateral damage* of the war on drugs, such as human rights violations, murders of civilians, and high rates of imprisonment without a fair trial<sup>80</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> "Mexico | World Prison. Brief."

As mentioned initially, one of the hypotheses of NS theory is that regional stabilization must precede (or be develop at the same time) of intervention. The MI was dedicated mainly to military-force improvement. The war framing of conflict is incompatible with *regional stabilization*, resulting in the regionalization of local conflicts due to the *asymmetrical impact of the external environment on internal conflict*. Countries like El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala with high poverty and corruption were exposed to a war for which their institutions were not ready. Reducing violence requires the creation of strong institutions, community resilience, and trained police to nest the drug-related conflict truly

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## Conclusions

This thesis investigated the regional effects of the Merida Initiative on Cartel violence in Mexico. The empirical exploration demonstrates that:

- 1.- The Merida Initiative is not the beginning of the US foreign intervention on counternarcotics programs; however, it generated conditions of instability without precedent.
- 2.- Framing the drug-related conflict as a *war against drugs* justified US choices to leverage the government. This led to an increase in violence and the spread of conflict around the region. Hence, the war against drugs unnests the conflict, frustrating efforts to mediate it.
- 3.- Exogenous intervention can result in conflict escalation.

Using maps of organized violence events in NC-A, I presented the distribution of the conflict in three phases of counternarcotics policies, before MI (2001-2007), MI implementation (2008-2010), and *beyond Merida* (2011-2017). Furthermore, I showed a table that summarizes the US antinarcotics aid along the three phases. I demonstrated a relationship between the programs and the increase of violence, suggesting that MI was the event in destabilizing the drug-related conflict; pointing in the lack of regional stabilization to contain the spillover. I found that there were US antinarcotic programs for Mexico before MI; however, they did not cause conflict escalation. Regarding this, I argued that *external intervention cannot provoke a conflict's escalation unless the domestic actor legitimizes the intervention*.

Future research might compare the Merida Initiative and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), both projects funded by the US. Moreover, we might also compare security regimes in Europe and America to identify counterweights for destabilizing actors. Regarding the war on drugs, NS demonstrates us that cooperative conflict management is a form of third-party intervention that is not based on the direct use of force and is not aimed at helping one of the participants win. This does not imply recognizing the VNSA as a legitimate actor; instead, it means acknowledging the costs of framing the drug problem as a war.

The war on drugs has actors who receive benefits from the struggle, and it is clear that they do not want to stop the war. This includes guns companies, military-tech enterprises, and the domestic political groups who profit from US financial aid. Domestically, the assassination of political leaders, social activists, and journalists have been attributed to the war on drugs and the fight between Cartels; in the context of war, the murder is expectable and normalized as necropolitics and can be used for political-economic interests of particular groups. All these cases have a regional relevance for nesting the conflict. As Jenne states, "in the absence of regional stability, cooperative techniques may not succeed even when conditions on the ground are optimal for conflict mediation."<sup>81</sup> Through this premise, I concluded that the war framing and hence, the MI was never addressed to mediate the conflict, and the war on drugs is contrary to nested conflict mediation.

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<sup>81</sup> Jenne, *Nested Security*, 13.

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