When Gen. Mauro Enrique Tello Quinonez retired after decades of service with the Mexican army, he still wanted to serve his country. He therefore willingly accepted a posting as a security advisor and senior counter-drug official in Cancún. Unfortunately, his first day on the job turned out to be his last: Tello was kidnapped, brutally tortured, and shot 11 times.
On February 3, 2009, his body, along with the mutilated and bullet-ridden bodies of his driver and security officer, was found in a car alongside a road in Cancún.

Tello was not the only high-ranking army officer killed in the city, which is best known for its lucrative tourist industry. In 2006, Lt. Col. Wilfrido Flores Saucedo and his aide were gunned down on a Cancún street. The assailants escaped and were never captured.

Luckily, in Tello’s case, the military had several leads and quickly moved in to assume control of the investigation. Cancún’s police chief was removed from his position and put under house arrest. His detainment was quickly followed by the apprehension of seven men, all members of the deadly and widely feared Los Zetas organization.

A Los Zetas leader Octavio Almanza was among those arrested for his direct involvement in the general’s assassination. Almanza, who was a Mexican soldier himself from 1997 to 2004, was stockpiling an impressive cache of weapons: Officials seized 43 rifles and handguns, two grenade launchers, 23 grenades, a rocket launcher, and more than 12,000 rounds of ammunition. Almanza’s brother Ricardo was also implicated in the killings, but unfortunately, he remains at large. Mexican officials have stated that Ricardo was in Belize at the time of his brother’s arrest, trying to smuggle a 20-ton shipment of cocaine into the country.

Through his involvement in the Tello killing, Octavio Almanza was sending a clear, unequivocal message to the Mexican government, one repeated both across Mexico and along the country’s border with the U.S.: The Zetas are unafraid and battle ready.

Imagine, for a moment, that one of America’s elite special operations units goes “rogue” and starts using its specialized skills, equipment, and training against the U.S. government... meet the Los Zetas organization.
its members receive specialized training in jungle, amphibious, urban, and high mountain operations from the best counterterrorism and counterinsurgency units in the world. In recent years, the GAFE’s primary mission morphed from providing protection to key officials and buildings to one of assisting the country in dismantling drugs cartels. Therefore, with their inside knowledge of the inner workings of cartels, along with their counterintelligence, disguise, and insurgency training, the Zetas are a complex and lethal force.

Under the umbrella of the Gulf cartel, the Zetas act as hit squads to eliminate the “enemy,” which typically consists of members of law enforcement and the Mexican government. Zeta executions are savage; they often set their targets on fire, decapitate them, and saturate their bodies with bullets. The Zetas also engage other cartels in the protracted battle for control of trafficking routes at the U.S.-Mexico border. Although other paramilitary or “enforcement groups” are present in those cartels, such as the Los Zeros of the Alianza (also known as Juarez) cartel, the DEA has labeled the Zetas as “the most technologically advanced, sophisticated, and violent.”¹ This group is clearly operating in the border region; in November 2008, for example, a Zeta leader named Jaime Gonzalez Duran was arrested just across the border from McAllen, Texas. Furthermore, the group may wield control over such U.S.-based gangs as the Mexican Mafia, the Texas Syndicate, MS-13, and the Hermanos Pistoleros Latinos.²

CHAOS AT THE BORDER

Marisella Molinar was like many people who live in El Paso, Texas: Every day, she made the quick trip across the border to her workplace in Juarez, Mexico. Molinar
was a secretary for a top lawyer in Juarez, and unfortunately, she was with him on December 3, 2008, when a cartel sought vengeance. Molinar and her employer were instantly killed when their vehicle was hit with a barrage of fire from AK-47s, with 85 rounds expended in all. It was yet another ruthless killing and a message to law enforcement and the Mexican government from the cartels. The citizens of El Paso continue to face this menacing threat just across the river; in fact, the violence in Juarez is escalating, with 400 deaths already in 2009.3

The protracted and violent battle for control of highly coveted drug routes into the United States is exacting a cost like never before. In 2005, the governors of Arizona and New Mexico declared a state of emergency within their border counties due to the escalating violence and threat to American citizens. The Mexican government criticized this action, although it sent officials to the table to discuss how to best address this issue with its American neighbors. Four years later, the situation is as dire as ever. Areas along the border are virtual war zones, with towns on both sides caught in the crossfire. For instance, border-related crime in Arizona is rapidly escalating, with increased numbers of kidnappings, shootings, and home invasions by masked men wearing military battle dress uniforms.4 Incredibly, in 2008, Phoenix ranked second in the world in kidnappings for ransom, just behind Mexico City.5

A battle is also raging for control of Interstate 35, a highly desired route for drug traffickers. I-35 begins at the border in Laredo, Texas, and it traverses major cities like Dallas, where Zeta presence has already been detected. In fact, a 2005 Justice Department memo indicated that the Zetas had been active in the Dallas area since 2003, and police there have launched a manhunt for Maximo Garcia Carrillo, a suspected Zeta who owns a house in the Oak Cliff suburb of the city. Carrillo is believed to have killed Dallas police officer Mark Nix.6

After Dallas, I-35 has intermittent empty stretches of highway, but it eventually passes through Oklahoma City, Kansas City, and Minneapolis. The interstate ends in Duluth, Minnesota, at the Canadian border. The importance of this corridor to the cartels is significant; as the former head of the DEA’s El Paso Intelligence Center once stated, “Drug traffickers kill for I-35.”7

More recently, the Zetas have also become involved in the human smuggling business, charging a 10-percent commission for use of the border and the Interstate 35 corridor.8 If it seems incredible that the Zetas charge smugglers to operate on U.S. real estate, consider that Zeta commandos are now reportedly living north of the Rio Grande.9

### 2009 Incidents: Crisis at the Border

Within the first few months of 2009, the situation along the Mexican border has continued to worsen. Some examples and statistics that illustrate this trend are as follows:

- The murder rate in Mexico is escalating. As of February 2009, 1,000 people were dead; in 2008, that number wasn’t reached until late April.
- In early March, fighting between rival gangs in a Juarez prison leaves 20 people dead and seven injured. To help control the violence, 1,500 extra security forces are deployed to the city.21
- In late February, gunmen attack a convoy carrying the governor of the border state of Chihuahua. The attack results in the death of one of the governor’s bodyguards.22
- Also in February, gunmen in Juarez engage a military vehicle, firing over 100 rounds, killing the city’s number-two law enforcement official and three bodyguards.23
- The same week in Juarez, five city police officers and a jail guard are killed. Signs soon appear in the city stating that an officer will die every 48 hours unless the police chief steps down. He promptly complies.
- Around the same time, “narco banners” in Juarez threaten the mayor’s family, including his relatives in the United States.24
- In mid-February, a shootout between cartel members and police leaves 10 dead in the border town of Reynosa, which is the home of many U.S.-owned factories.25
- In January, 11 people are killed and one is kidnapped within a 24-hour period in Juarez.26
THE MAJOR CARTELS: FLUSH WITH CASH AND WEAPONS

When it comes to the ongoing battle for control of the Mexican drug trade, a majority of the violence is perpetrated by three groups, each of which has massive cash assets and the weaponry of a small army: the Gulf cartel (which is the Zeta’s parent organization), the Sinaloa cartel, and the Juarez cartel.

• GULF CARTEL: Gulf cartel leader Osiel Cárdenas, a former state police officer in Mexico, was arrested and extradited to the U.S. in 2007. In his absence, the operational leadership of the Gulf cartel has been decentralized, with three major branches and leaders. Based in Matamoros, the cartel has a large presence in the border cities of Reynosa, Miguel Aleman, and Nuevo Laredo. The Gulf cartel also has an extensive support system, among them the Zetas, who are the enforcement arm of the organization. More than 175 Gulf cartel operatives who were working in the U.S. were arrested last fall as part of the DEA’s Project Reckoning, which identified networks reaching from the Mexican border to Georgia, New York, North Carolina, and other states. Through this operation, the DEA seized $60 million in cash and over 40 tons of illegal drugs that belonged to the Gulf cartel.¹⁰

• SINALOA CARTEL: The Sinaloas, also known as the Federation, began to contest the Gulf cartel’s domination of the coveted southwest Texas corridor after Cárdenas’s arrest. Although it rapidly
grew in size and wealth, the Sinaloa cartel was recently dealt a major blow via the DEA’s Operation Xcellerator, which dismantled much of the cartel’s operation in the United States. The agency announced in February 2009 that over the last two years, they were able to pinpoint 70 drug distribution centers in 26 U.S. states; in all, agents arrested 750 traffickers and confiscated 23 tons of cocaine. Notably, many of the Sinaloa’s drug hubs were not in major metropolitan areas. For example, one distribution center was located in Stow, Ohio, a quiet community of 35,000. The Sinaloas were sending cocaine through the local airport, shipping the drug from California to Stow on a regular basis.11

• JUAREZ CARTEL:
The Juarez cartel now calls itself the Golden Triangle Alliance, or La Alianza Triángulo de Oro, because its leadership is located in three Mexican states. At its height in the late 1990s, when pushing 50 percent of the cocaine into the U.S., the Juarez cartel was considered the most powerful in the world, exacting a $200 million profit per week. The organization is still powerful, and it is currently fighting with the Zetas for control of the Nuevo Laredo area.

THE MEXICAN ARMY: ENGAGED IN LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

Mexican president Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa’s primary goals when entering office in 2006 were to grow his country’s economy by creating jobs and to reduce poverty. Unfortunately, the battle for control with the drug cartels

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has proved a major item on Calderón’s agenda. Mexico’s murder rate is escalating dramatically, from 3,000 in 2007 to over 6,000 in 2008. There were 1,000 murders in January 2009 alone, provoking the U.S. State Department to announce a travel advisory for American citizens planning to vacation in Mexico over the 2009 spring holiday. This type of announcement certainly doesn’t bode well for one of Mexico’s primary industries: tourism.

Calderón, who has compared Los Zetas to al-Qaeda, has made combating the drug cartels his highest law enforcement goal. He is employing Mexico’s military to enforce compliance with his objectives, using 45,000 soldiers to meet the threat and join the 5,000 federal police already detailed to the issue. The Mexican Army is engaging in small-scale combat with the cartels, particularly the paramilitary factions like the Zetas—who have the exact same weapons in their arsenal and are able to meet confrontation head on. Unfortunately, illegal drug operations and corruption go hand-in-hand, so it is difficult to know who you can trust on the streets. For instance, last year, four policemen from Nuevo Laredo were arrested for conspiring with the Zetas, using police frequencies to pass them critical information.

THE U.S. RESPONSE

Clearly concerned with escalating bloodshed at America’s southern border, the previous director of the CIA surprised many when he stated that the violence in Mexico presents the number-two threat to U.S. national security, just behind al-Qaeda. Accordingly, federal and state governments have recently unveiled new plans to bolster U.S.-Mexico border security. For example, the federal government has launched the Secure Border Initiative, which includes plans for more agents to patrol the border, secure ports of entry, and strictly enforce immigration laws. The government also placed National Guard troops at the southwestern border under Operation Jump Start, where they are assisting U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Beyond these efforts, the United States is aiding Mexico’s fight against the cartels under the provisions of the Merida Initiative, a multiyear $1.4 billion anti-narcotics package that increases law enforcement cooperation and intelligence sharing between the U.S. and Mexico. This initiative includes aircraft, software, hardware, communications technology, training to strengthen the Mexican judicial system, intelligence instruction, and advice on vetting new law enforcement personnel to prevent and identify corruption.

In addition, the state of Texas recently launched Operation Rio Grande to increase border security. The efforts consisted of short-duration, regional
operations that integrated local, state, and federal agencies. However, the spike in violence and necessary response to protect citizens is sapping the already resource-constrained state; in fact, Texas governor Rick Perry recently requested another $135 million to go toward the border security of his state.

**STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

Since 2005, the DEA has continually warned that drug-related violence will spill over the Mexican border into the United States. More recently, an October 21, 2008, FBI intelligence report painted a particularly grim picture. It advised that the Zetas were reinforcing their ranks and stockpiling weapons in safe houses in the U.S. in response to crackdowns; moreover, the report predicted an escalation of violence on both sides of border in the months to come.

Thus, the future is now a harsh reality. Although it appears that tactical-level needs are being addressed, larger national security questions will require additional action to turn the tide on the growing instability in the region and the entire hemisphere. For instance, can national assets be used for domestic security when it is threatened by criminal terrorists such as the Zetas? Also, with $12 billion to $15 billion per year flowing from the United States to Mexican drug traffickers, how can we reduce demand or discourage use?

Michael Sullivan, former acting director of the ATF, recently stated that investigators have traced large numbers of the illegal weapons found in Mexico to the United States. The U.S. is addressing the issue with gun dealers in our country and at the border through the ATF’s Project Gunrunner, but how can Mexico tighten its border security to stop the southward flow of weapons into the hands of the cartels?

Furthermore, how can the U.S. better secure long, unattended, open stretches of its northern border now that Mexican gangs have infiltrated Canada? The Sinaloa and Gulf cartels have been strengthening their drug trafficking operations in Canada, and they are contributing to escalating gang and drug-related violence in that country.

It’s also critical to note that Hezbollah, Hamas, and possibly al-Qaeda are already operating in South America. Therefore, policymakers and operators alike must ask the following question and confront the inevitable answer: Would the Zetas partner with these groups and provide a new, asymmetric challenge to the U.S.?

In the face of the escalating threats at the U.S. border, perhaps it is time to take a harder line to protect our security. One option is to officially designate Los Zetas...
It’s also critical to note that Hezbollah, Hamas, and possibly al-Qaeda are already operating in South America.

as a terrorist group. The Zetas meet the State Department’s threshold as a foreign organization that threatens our national security, and they certainly pose more of a danger to our national security than several dormant groups that reside on the list (November 17 and Aum Shinriyko/Aleph, for example). The Zetas also have the weaponry to operate as irregular forces, with fire teams capable of carrying out autonomous operations with tactical flexibility. It is time to recognize that some transnational criminal groups aren’t just in the money-making business—they also use terror as a tactic and act in a subversive manner toward governments and law enforcement institutions.

If the murder statistics and the fact that the Mexican Army is engaged in conflict with its own citizens aren’t convincing enough, consider that 53 percent of Mexicans believing the drug cartels are winning the ongoing battle.20 In the words of former U.S. drug czar Gen. Barry McCaffrey, “This is the most alarming situation I’ve seen in Mexico in 15 years. Our own interests are at stake. We must stand with these people; they’re literally fighting for their lives.” And, it appears, so are we.

ENDNOTES

2 http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200805.grayson.loszetas.html#note12

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