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Mexican Drug Cartels and their Australian Connections: Tracking and Disrupting Dark Networks

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Abstract

For Australia, the emergence of Mexican drug cartels presents significant policymaking, intelligence and strategic challenges. The size of these operations, their resource base and the fluid nature of dark network structures makes these enterprise syndicates a highly versatile and resilient opponent. This paper will provide an analysis of the organisational levels of dark networks in dealing with Mexican drug cartels and explores how these profit-seeking transnational actors form and operate including their motivations and modus operandi. It will also address the problematic nature of dark networks and the importance of robust intelligence collection and analysis capabilities to better prioritise border protection responses as well as to increase the ability of the security sector to target dispersed 'webs' of illicit affiliations, with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: Mexican drug cartels, transnational organised crime, intelligence-led policing, national security.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the schemes of many organised crime groups have developed into sophisticated networks with common purpose that have increasingly taken on a highly adaptive dimension to their planning and co-ordination activities. Partly due to new developments in travel, technology and communications, they are no longer limited to local or traditional geographical locations in which to conduct illicit business activities. Accordingly, the globalisation of crime has meant that nation states faced with identifying and confronting threats that are posed by transnational organised crime (TOC) must strengthen their ability to conduct and co-ordinate investigations and work with international partners to tackle joint problem areas such as reducing the global supply of (and demand for) illegal drugs.

Yet identifying and fighting such linked threat actors and entrepreneurial criminal organisations creates many difficult challenges for Australian policy-makers and practitioners when deciding on the best course of multi-jurisdictional action.

A variety of practical considerations from cost effectiveness, to issues regarding sovereignty to criminal infiltration of law enforcement, to the time-intensive nature of broad-based surveillance approaches (that do not necessarily produce instant results) all remain central concerns in steps towards the installation of best practice policy formulation. Additionally, a bulk of law enforcement in Australia continues to spotlight only single modes of trafficking or drug product (Bright et. al., 2012).

In light of such considerations, we argue that social network analysis — in particular analysis of cross-border 'dark networks' — can help cover critical gaps in addressing the fluid and convergent nature of TOC networks while offering some pathways for potential solutions to overcome these types of diversified challenges that link suppliers with consumers. This will be demonstrated by firstly reviewing the literature on social network analysis, with particular attention paid to recent work on dark networks. The article will then present a case study of Mexican cartels in order to demonstrate the way in which these independent criminal organisations have evolved their operations into multifaceted network structures that utilise linkages with ad hoc criminal groups operating in the Asia-Pacific region. The case study highlights the way in which Mexican cartels have created and sustained a dark network of drug-coordinated production and supply channels that are now capable of penetrating large markets, with Australia becoming an increasingly lucrative target. Finally, this article considers the implications for Australia and its security sector. It outlines some ways in which network analysis can be used to inform current and future approaches to border protection that includes the role of enhanced intelligence to help combat dark networks, transit hubs and related implications.

Dark Networks

A wide variety of illegally operating organisations, including in drug trafficking, people smuggling and money laundering, comprise profit-driven dark networks. These elastic networks are characterised as being sets of 'social entities linked directly or indirectly by various ties…characterized by a predominance of informal and communicative relations' (Raab & Milward, 2003, p.417). Because dark networks operate in the shadows and function through the use of mobile and dispersed sub-groups, such a dynamic has make it difficult "…to develop any single, elegant theory of dark networks" (Wood, 2006, p.252). But in general terms, they exploit network forms of organisation, have buffers between people, are typified by divisions of labour and retain fluid arrangements between multiple groupings 'where one unit is not merely the formal subordinate in some larger hierarchical arrangement' (O'Toole, 1997, p45).

Several distinctions can be made between open and trusting interconnected networks that are legal as opposed to the rise of dark networked enterprises. Covert dark network forms repeatedly operate on a 'need-to-know basis' symbolised by compartmentalised cells. As Raab (2003, p.420) has summarised, dark networks which operate in the global drug trade resemble '…a chain of bilateral contracts; a group or a person will only know his or her immediate predecessor or successor in the supply chain. Moreover, these distribution chains lack exclusivity; individuals at one level contract with individuals at of levels.' This type of layered organisational structure makes them far more difficult to detect and eliminate as well as highly resilient through wide dispersions of resources and operations. These illegal enterprise syndicates have proven able to adapt to law enforcement pressures by quickly finding, for example, new approaches for managing their funds, selling drugs and expanding transhipment routes.

Dark networks do come in various forms and shapes. For example, in Jackson's (2006) analysis of terrorist groups, a distinction is drawn between chain-networks (sequential links in a single line), spoke networks (links radiating from a single node), and all-channel networks in which units are coupled to all other units. This is similar to Grint's (2005) use of network hierarchy wherein there is just enough structural coherence and coordination to maintain the network but there are no strictly defined limits on intermingled roles or incumbents. Grint (2005, p.156) also distinguishes between two network types when dealing with dark networks: the random type in which power and leadership are 'evenly spread throughout an organisation' and the scale-free model in which a few people have 'enormous numbers of contacts'. Similarly, in dealing in comparable areas like remarketed prescription drugs, there are many so-called 'gray' networks – networks are not illegal per se but can nevertheless be troublesome because actors trade commodities through distribution channels that are unofficial or unintended by the original manufacturer.

Another way of understanding dark networks is to ask 'how much strategic, operational and tactical influence specific components of the organisation have over others?' (Jackson, 2006, p.245). Jackson (2006) underlines the need to distinguish between tightly coupled groups, coupled networks and loosely coupled movements. The tightly coupled group is like the classic hierarchical organisation, for example, the Provisional Irish Republican Army. The coupled network has greater plasticity in managing risks that leads to a greater autonomy of human agents (and replaceable lower-level players), although there still appears to be a 'network core' to provide direction. This core might include a pre-existing group with expertise and management knowhow and the ability to recruit or inspire new members. In the loosely coupled and vertically integrated movement, no individual or component group can make binding decisions for other actors in the network.

This might incorporate freelance elements such as the hiring of operators like neighbourhood gangs to protect and procure transportation corridors (Williams 1998). Such a dynamic of coupled or loosely coupled networks with separated 'outsourced' services best represent many of these alternative forms of modern criminal entrepreneurship.

The Rise of Mexican Cartels

Mexico remains at the centre of the global drug trade. Drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) have operated in Mexico for over one hundred years. During the twentieth century, many of these groups established themselves as the key suppliers of marijuana and heroin. Throughout Mexico's period of one-party rule (1929–2000) via the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), various criminal groupings acquired significant wealth and power and were able to consolidate their illicit networks, safe havens and transit routes by spreading corruption within government circles and taking advantage of inadequate border security.

Due to an overall policy of accommodation by the federal government, officials guaranteed various degrees of impunity for certain DTOs in exchange for a limited regulation of illicit market and its profit-making activities (Beittel, 2015, p.8). Such an informal agreement rested on a continuity of criminal production, protection and assets that had been fundamentally underwritten by the PRI during its period in government. However, by the end of the twentieth century, Mexico's transition to democracy presented some opposition to this informal pact partially due to the subsequent influx of new political figures like former President Felipe Calderón. Calderón had based his campaign themes around policy issues like eliminating corruption and supported drug crop reduction as well as more aggressive approaches along the intervention and enforcement spectrum.

Calderón formally declared a 'war against the cartels' in 2006. Calderón's military-led crackdown saw the deployment of over 50,000 troops to various regions with a particular concentration in the territories that border the US. Unfortunately, the Mexican government severely underestimated the extent to which the cartels had amassed large arsenals to defend their territories and lucrative drug routes — and an accompanying willingness to use torture, assassination and brutal domestic terrorist tactics — as well as the large-scale and wide-spread infiltration by the cartels into Mexican government institutions and law enforcement agencies to assist ongoing impunity. For example, the extent of brazen violence and corruption in Mexico was featured in the national and international coverage of the mass murder of 43 students that allegedly occurred due to the collusion and at the behest of a local mayor and his wife, the corrupt local police and a local criminal gang (Dudley & Gagne, 2014).

Over the past decade, every state in Mexico, with the exception of the Federal District (Mexico City) and parts of Oaxaca and Chiapas, has become a claimed territory by a cartel or in some cases, disputed territory by several DTOs (DEA, 2015). During this time, various cartels have fractured, different cartels have emerged (like the hyper-violent La Familia Michoacana) and new coalitions have been formed in attempt to control a larger share of supply routes into the US and beyond. As Beittel (2015, p.5) highlighted '…the splintering of the large DTOs into competing factions and gangs of different sizes took place over several years. The development of these different crime groups, ranging in scope from transnational criminal organisations to small local mafias with certain trafficking or other crime specialties, has made the crime situation even more diffuse and their criminal behaviour harder to eradicate.'

Such developments in Mexico have taken place in the backdrop of a number of joint policy initiatives between the US and partners like Colombia aiming to target the cocaine industry operating in the Andean region. Ironically, the rise of the Mexican cartels and their increased power in the global illicit drug market can be explained due to some of the initial policy successes of the US and Colombian governments' actions (e.g. Plan Colombia and the Andean Regional Initiative) to dismantle Colombian DTOs. These included the closure of traditional drug corridors, such as the Florida route, during the 1990s and early 2000s (Miami Herald, 24 June, 2004). But although these efforts had some success in destroying the monopoly previously enjoyed by Colombian cartels, they simultaneously created a power vacuum and an opportunity for the Mexican cartels to expand their profits and interests in the global illicit drugs trade. This is known as the 'balloon effect' whereby pressure (via various resources) that is applied to a specific area to eradicate a problem, instead, results in the problem being relocated to another area - usually providing only a temporary inconvenience to criminal activities (Bagely, 2012, p.5). In fact, it can even be argued that Mexican drug cartels strongly benefitted from the breakup of Colombian DTOs and have proven to be highly entrepreneurial and creative – such as sub-contracting the trafficking of cocaine to displaced Colombian gangs.

At the same time, the capturing or killing of drug leaders in Mexico itself has only served to create violent succession battles within the cartels themselves (Beittel, 2015). Overall, the protracted conflict between these many players has resulted in over 250,000 people internally displaced in Mexico since 2006 while estimates of deaths resulting from the spiked violence of the war range between 60,000 and 120,000 with a further 25,000 people considered to be desaparecidos (disappeared) (Beittel, 2015). Some argue that the use and threat of such extreme violence is not only used by Mexican cartels to settle disputes and replace leaders but seen as desirable to encourage employee loyalty as well as a 'semblance of order' with suppliers, creditors,

and buyers through a culture of fear (MacCoun and Reuter, 2001). Regardless, in the last few years, the key players to emerge from this setting that have displaced other Latin American DTOs include the renowned Sinaloa cartel (the most dominant group and increasingly tied to the drug trade in Australia) and its affiliates (also known as the Pacific Federation) and Los Zetas and the Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación.

Additionally, Mexican cartels are now largely poly-drug organisations, who traffic items like cocaine, heroin, crystal methamphetamine and marijuana, and have begun to systematically expand their operations to other areas such as human smuggling and kidnapping. They have emerged the key players in the control the main drug transport routes into the US market as well as other foreign markets in Asia and Western and Eastern Europe. Interestingly, some critics have argued that a shift in American intelligence priorities since 9/11 has left significant gaps in multisource intelligence related to the evolution of these major TOC networks (Burton and West, 2009). For others, this poly-drug trafficking has been a "deliberate modus operandi" to make these networks more evasive, multilayered and profitable (Hughes et. al., 2016). And while Mexican cartels have a growing international presence, groups like Sinaloa continue to represent decentralized horizontal groupings characterised by independent cell-like cross border networks albeit with some sense of allegiance to a king-pin 'entrepreneur'. As Beittel (2015, p.6) observed, 'the larger organisations (Sinaloa, for example) that have adopted a cellular structure may still try to protect their leadership as in the recent orchestrated escape of the world's most wanted drug kingpin, El Chapo Guzmán.'

Mexican Cartels in Australia

The rising appearance of Mexican cartels in Australia — and their transformation into illicit multinational conglomerates that aim to control transportation hubs — is the result of a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors. A key push factor incentivising cartels to seek out new markets has been the relative decline in demand for cocaine from the US. In the ruthless pursuit of profit, this decline — possibly coupled with the legalization of marijuana in several states -— has meant that the US market alone can no longer sustain the rate of supply flowing from the 'south' into the 'north' (UNODC, 2015). Further, the weakening price of illicit drugs in the US market in comparison to European and Asia Pacific regions has acted as a further 'push' factor for cartels in seeking to franchise their profit-maximising operations further afield.

On the other hand, there are several 'pull' factors that have made Australia an attractive option in TOC expansion. According to the UNDOC (2015a. p.2), East Asia, South-East Asia and Oceania have the largest number of Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS) users in the world, totalling 9.5 million and a further 3.9 million ecstasy users.

Mexican cartels have drastically expanded their production and distribution of ATS in recent years, making the Asia Pacific a lucrative as well as logical region in which to extend their operations. Further, the appearance of Mexican DTOs in Australia coincided with a period in which the strength of the Australian dollar reached parity with the US dollar and at some points exceeded parity. The strength of the dollar and its ability to be easily converted into US currency has proved to be a strong "pull" factor for the cartels.

Moreover, Australia commands some of the highest prices (wholesale and retail) for illicit drugs in the world. So, while there are greater transportation costs and other miscellaneous expenses associated with distribution to Asia Pacific markets, the revenue gained from accessing these markets far outweighs the initial outlays and costs on the part of the cartels. For example, according to UNODC (2015b), the wholesale price per kilo of cocaine salts in the United States is approximately US$54,000 and in the UK the average price is US$87,000, however, in Australia, the price ranges between US$228,000 to US$259,000. In 2016, a spokesperson for the Australian Federal Police (AFP) even estimated the value to be as high as AU$350,000 (Banks, 2016). In this context, it is clear to see that in comparison to other major markets, the extremely high prices that can be obtained in Australia for wholesale products will continue to be a strong 'pull' factor for Mexican DTOs and other organised crime groups.

Mexican cartels generally deal in the wholesale distribution of illegal narcotics, especially in relation to cost-effective activities in foreign markets. Their preference for primarily engaging the in wholesale rather than retail aspects of the illicit drug trade places these groups in a semi-dependent position when breaking into new markets. While the cartels have been able to takeover established smuggling routes into the Pacific (often previously set-up by Colombian cartels several decades earlier), there is a need on the part of the cartels to create and foster strong linkages with local criminal groups who resell the product through their own networks (ACC, 2015). The preference for the cartels to adopt this type of business practice is because they produce and traffic such vast quantities of marijuana, heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines that there is enough profit to be made from distributing wholesale without needing to branch into local distribution — which is riskier and prone to violent friction with competing criminal groups.

Certainly, it does remain difficult to determine the total amount of illicit narcotics that are produced and trafficked by Mexican cartels each year. However, recent reports do suggest that multiplying connections among criminal enterprises such as alliances between members of the Sinaloa cartel and groups such as Oficina de Evigado (criminal organisation in Medellin) and the Colombian FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of

Colombia) are a key to the Mexican cartels accessing up to 450 tons of Colombian cocaine from these two groups alone each year (El Universal, December 2015).

As stated, these multi-nodal structures and the adaptive use of criminal facilitators with different working arrangements pose a number of challenges to Australia's approach to combat TOC. For instance, in order for the cartels to ensure the continued receipt of wholesale shipments by local criminal groups, they often add 'sweeteners' to each business transaction. Some reports have suggested Mexican cartels provide local criminal groups with incentives such as illegal handguns and other arms in order to 'sweeten' their business dealings (Courier Mail, 2015). Such incentives create further potential domestic security problems for Australian law enforcement as local criminal groups are increasingly able to access new sources for the supply of illegal firearms. Complicating this issue is the fact that cartels such as the Sinaloa group do not favour a particular local criminal network in Australia. Instead, they appear to deal with any local criminal organisation that is in the position to regularly receive their large consignments. These include but are not limited to 'Lebanese, Chinese and Albanian diaspora groups, and Australian outlaw biker gangs' (NPR, 2012). This is of particular concern because of the potential escalation of violence and 'turf wars' between local criminal groups vying for control of domestic distribution networks.

Disrupting Dark Networks: Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Policy Options

For policy-makers and Australia's law enforcement agencies, attempting to stem what seems to be a never-ending tide of illicit drugs into Australia can appear to be an exercise in frustration. However, there are a number of things that can be done to better address the problem of Mexican DTOs, their growing deception and this emerging threat to Australia's national security. The one aspect that should be recognised first and foremost is that this threat to Australia's national security is not posed by one particular group or foreign organisation such as the Sinaloa cartel, rather, it is a threat posed by a dispersed and adaptive dark-network structure that spans the Asia-Pacific and includes multiple foreign and domestic actors.

In broad terms, in combating DTOs and the operation of illicit markets, much recent work on disrupting illicit networks has focussed on two key approaches: kinetic and non-kinetic (Roberts and Everton, 2011). The kinetic approach entails '…offensive measures to eliminate or capture network members and their supporters and employs such things as bombs and bullets to pursue the campaign' (Roberts & Everton, 2011, p.3). Yet such military-led approaches by Mexico (sometimes in conjunction with support from impacted nations) — that have largely been fixated on removing the leadership of the major DTOs — have had only a limited impact on the actual

flow of drugs. The Mexican government's force-on-force strategies have also had a consistent track-record of being heavily criticized for misallocating resources and sharply increasing human rights violations by the military, which is largely untrained in domestic policing (see Beitel, 2015).

Alternately, Robert and Everton (2011, p.3) outline a variety of ways in which the non-kinetic approach '…employs neither bombs nor bullets but instead uses non-coercive means to counter networks and impair a combatant's will to fight.' Non-kinetic approaches to the problem of criminality will encompass a variety of qualitative elements and related strategies that focus areas like supporting institutional judicial reform and community-based rehabilitation programs in Mexico itself. It can also entail increased intelligence gathering activities and the improved sharing of intelligence to support investigations and operational activities by impacted actors, including the enforcement of criminal financial deterrence.

In particular, intelligence collection and analysis capabilities can assist to ensure a measured, targeted response to prioritized issues while helping to ensure consequences of particular policy frameworks are fully recognised. For Australia, this will demand adopting a framework that utilizes a long-term 'staged approach' that prioritises intelligence gathering activities, including addressing deficits in HUMINT operations, that aim to map out the reliance on sophisticated dark networks that operate across the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, utilizing network analysis can allow openings to better identify critical regional nodes, the organisation and resources relied upon by these networks to function effectively and, critically, support decision-makers to develop longer term planning prescriptions rather than simply fixate on immediate enforcement activities.

Many illicit drugs are not directly smuggled from Mexico to Australia. For example, the majority of cocaine entering Australia is channelled through third countries in the Pacific, passing through hubs such as in New Caledonia, Tonga, Vanuatu and Fiji. 'In 2010-11, the majority of cocaine intercepted coming into Australia entered via small craft by way of the Pacific Islands…. or stowed away in commercial shipping containers (say, hidden in a shipment of ride-on lawn mowers or stone pavers)' (Pottenger, 2013). Similarly, in 2013, this was evidenced by several large seizures including a capture via a luxury yacht that netted 750kg of cocaine bound for the Australian market (Raggat, 2013). Indeed, with increased US surveillance on the Mexican order alongside airports worldwide having tightened security settings, the US coast guard noted 'that the rise in cocaine trafficking in the Pacific corresponded with a 66 percent drop in cocaine trafficking on land' (Martel, 2015). So with the growth of the Pacific maritime corridor, it will remain crucial that policy-makers begin to focus on strategies that concentrate on the 'borderless' nature of crime, how

law enforcement agencies cooperate in an international context and best practice in areas like maritime interdiction and deterring the financing of such cartel activates.

According to UNODC 2015 World Drug Report, maritime seizures account for the largest quantities, averaging 365kg per seizure between 2009 and 2014 (UNODC, 2015, p.39). In 2013, parcel post was the most commonly detected method of drug importation in Australia. However, in the same year, just three maritime seizure cases accounted for 74% of the total weight of heroin intercepted by Australian law enforcement agencies (The Guardian, 2013). UNODC (2015a, p.39–40) has correctly argued that maritime interdiction has potentially the greatest impact on total quantities of drug smuggled, trafficking flows and availability of illicit drugs on a global level and therefore provides a clear opportunity for law enforcement agencies to produce positive outcomes in confronting the threat before it reaches Australian shores.

In addition to cocaine, the synthetic drugs market has become more complex and interconnected with other regions. A 2015 UNODC report entitled 'The Challenge of Synthetic Drugs in East and South-East Asia and Oceania' (2015, p.4) identified that the synthetic drugs market in East, South-East Asia and Oceania 'is not a separate and self-contained entity, but part of a larger complex global network with interconnect channels for supply and demand'. The growing appetite for synthetic drugs has further encouraged Mexican cartels to increase their production, connection and distribution platforms across the Asia-Pacific. For instance, in 2012, Philippine law enforcement reported dismantling a sophisticated meth lab operated by a Chinese drug trafficking group which was found to have clear connections to Mexican criminal networks (UNODC, 2015a, p.13). In 2013, Korean officials seized 15kgs of crystalline methamphetamine and identified Mexico as the most likely point of origin of the drugs. In the same year, Japanese officers uncovered the trafficking of crystalline methamphetamine from Mexico directly into Japan (UNODC, 2015b, p.70). Similarly, in 2015 the Australian Crime Commission concluded that Mexican cartels are involved in methamphetamine in Australia and have been actively seeking out partnerships with local criminal networks in the region (ACC, 2015a).

More recently, reports have identified the forging of close links between Chinese organised crime groups and Mexican cartels (Harris, 2014). These connections relate to the importation (by Mexican cartels from Chinese organised crimes groups) of precursors for the production of methamphetamines. The finished product is then shipped from Mexico (primarily Jalisco state) back to the Chinese mainland. Such structures illustrate the evolving organisational forms and symbiotic relationships within dark networks. And in another example, the announcement in early 2016 of a 'super seizure' of ice that originated from Hong Kong with connections in mainland

China demonstrated the degree to which diverse organised crime groups have been able to develop and co-ordinate production and distribution methods (ABC, 2016).

Other studies have pointed to these networks reverting to 'low' technical modes of communication that include targeting older people as unsuspecting couriers (Nixon, 2016). Again, while these types of dispersed and agile organisational structures — from specialists to amateurs to opportunists — make it increasingly difficult for law enforcement agencies to easily identify high-value assets and targets in the network, they do reinforce the importance of strengthening transnational law enforcement cooperation, such as police-to-police information sharing and cooperation in investigations.

Overall, it is apparent that, first, in regard to skill and resource sharing, criminal groups have converged to form overarching networks that have removed previous reliance on unfettered access to a specific geographical location in which to conduct activities. In short, current practices are characterised by a wide variety of openings to adopt and exploit effective cell-type structures. Second, while many geographical limitations are removed, the nature of these networks mean that continued operations are contingent on 'collective cooperation' and some degree of fixed assets and transfer to achieve goals. Third, this places individuals, groups and the network as a whole in a perpetual state of semi-dependence. So even if parts of the network may not be entirely monitored, it is this perpetual state of semi-dependence that can be potentially used as leverage by law enforcement agencies when formulating policies (and transnational solutions) aimed at attacking 'weakest-links' within network settings — stemming from actors like cartel members to corrupt officials to financial intermediaries.

In order for Mexican cartels to effectively penetrate markets in the Asia Pacific, they are forced to establish relationships with intermediaries and local actors in foreign markets to help guarantee the supply chain and distribution of their product. Such semi-dependence is amplified due to the preference of Mexican cartels to primarily deal in the wholesale aspects of the illicit drug trade in foreign markets. For instance, in order for cartels to supply wholesale quantities of cocaine salts to the Australia market, they are forced to draw on the resources of a network that originates in rural Mexico, which then expands to include actors in the United States, East and Southeast Asia, the Pacific islands and ends with ties with local actors in Australia. This simple description reveals how this network performance is dependent on a vast array of linkages in multiple countries. These linkages are critical juncture points across the network because they are the key to keeping profits and the wider operational success of the network's goals.

As a result of their operational importance, these critical junctures are potential weak points in the network that can be pro-actively exploited by law enforcement agencies. Further, unlike most countries, Australia is in a unique position to target these critical junctures and exploit the weaknesses of these facilitating networks due to its geographical location and systematic ties with many Asia-Pacific nations. This must include not only areas like maritime interdiction or enforcing criminal financial deterrence but assembling closer relationships with partners such as America's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as well as developing the customs and law enforcement capabilities of Pacific states that do not have the current capacity to patrol their territory and borders. Australia's influence in the Asia-Pacific means that a focus on capacity-building with international partners and related areas like intelligence analysis and gathering can provide increased opportunities to map dark network structures and derive optimal planning and sustainable disruption strategies.

Conclusion

Mexican drug cartels are well-organised global businesses. This TOC threat and allied supply chains has grown significantly in density, diversity and complexity. Mexican-driven networks continue to operate in a multidimensional manner worldwide, including utilising dark networks and emerging trafficking routes throughout the Asia-Pacific. This internal dynamic through the use of forward and backward linkages, dispersed criminal facilitators in many countries and assorted smuggling routes and tactics means that DTOs are not a stand-alone or static movement. The fundamental point is that '…governments and law enforcement agencies have to think and act much more in network terms; they need to develop the same kind of flexibility to operate both nationally and transnationally through the creation of informal transnational law enforcement networks based on trust that is exhibited by drug-trafficking networks. Greater care also needs to be given to devising strategies for more effective attacks on networks' (Williams, 1998, p.154).

As such, the enhancing capacity to map and track transportation hubs, specialised cells and money laundering techniques will all be necessary first steps that must be accompanied with improved sharing and collaboration with foreign counterparts about emerging Mexican drug cartels, their structure and the rise of illicit exchanges in the region. This will enable, in part, a better understanding of how these dark networks operate, the convergence of criminal activities at critical nodes and their unique transportation and distribution characteristics. It will also involve rethinking how intelligence collection and analysis capabilities can be best prioritized and implemented in order to support international efforts to identify such threat convergence and disrupt high-leverage intervention points within transnational organised crime chains.

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