



Introduction

Crime, when it exceeds a certain threshold, becomes a risk to National Security, like pandemics, terrorism or any other Public Health issue. It is a political problem and, therefore, a multifaceted and multi-layered one. The dichotomous and plastic simplism that differentiates between good and bad, just and unjust, or that focuses on only one of its dimensions, is not effective.

The existence of organised crime represents a challenge to the State by competing with its power and preventing it from fulfilling its primary mission of providing protection to its population and is even an indicator of its failed nature. Indeed, the Weberian definition of the State includes, as its main attribute, the monopoly of legitimate violence. Tolerance questions the capacity of institutions by damaging their credibility: the perception of power is power, and its absence, the opposite. This is why failing to successfully confront this phenomenon can sometimes be worse than not confronting it at all.

Background

Drug trafficking

We are dealing with a lucrative business which, on the supply side alone, involved around 175,000 people in Mexico by the end of 2022, according to a DEA study—making it the fifth-largest employer in the country. The minimum estimated annual profits of these cartels stand at \$6 billion (McDonnell, 2023). Therefore, tackling drug trafficking means dealing with an economic and business model and the reverberations that come with it.

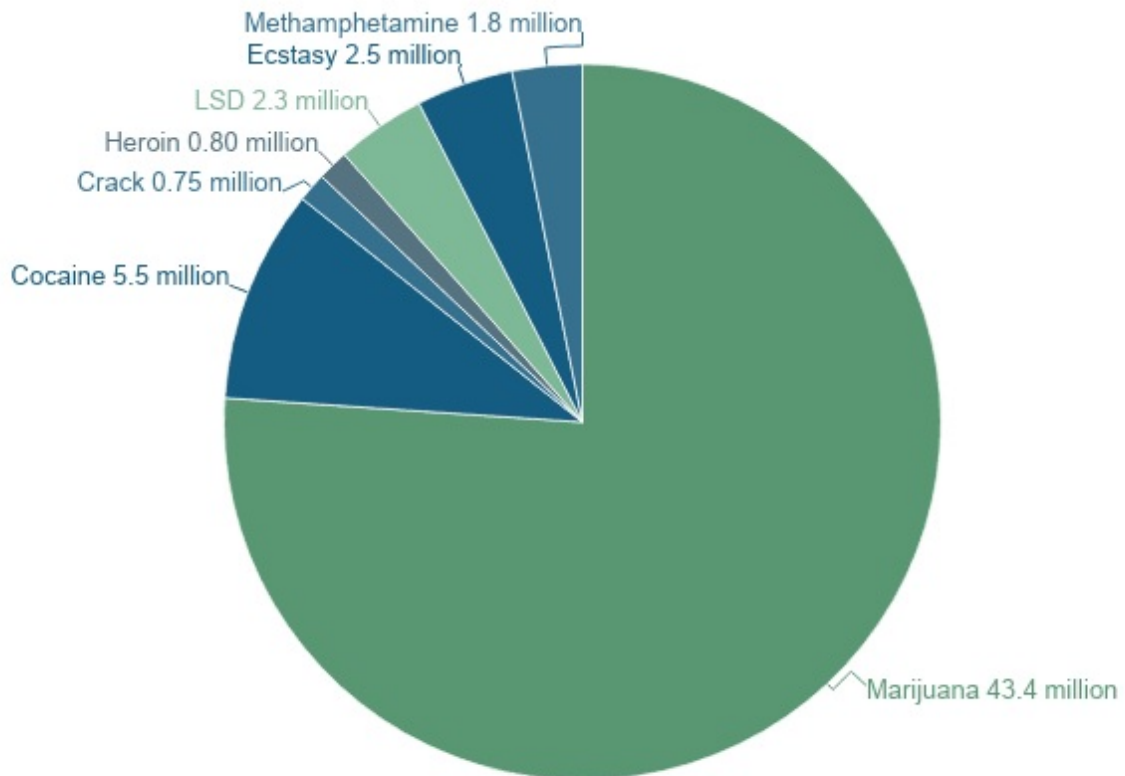
Thus, a certain area planted with coffee or cocoa produces more than if it is planted with rice, but much less than if it is dedicated to coca leaf, marijuana or opium gum. One kilogram of coca—a crop now beginning to take hold in Mexico—generates at least 6,667 times more income than a kilogram of maize. In a context of poverty and lack of development, this has led to the abandonment of traditional agriculture. In fact, it accounts for 30% of the deforestation caused by converting the rich Central American jungles into agricultural land.

In short, drug trafficking is a business and those who engage in it are companies—illegal, but companies—with their own culture—violent, but culture nonetheless. These are products sold in a market—illegal, but a market. And that market is in the United States, whose policies towards this phenomenon establish the context of the sector and largely dictate business strategy. These are companies created to meet a demand, they adapt to the market environment and its rules, and, like any other, they also promote demand.

In the United States in 2022, no fewer than 109,680 people died of drug overdoses, and around 107,500 in 2023; it is estimated that about one million have died since 2000. According to a 2020 report by the National Centre for Drug Abuse Statistics, 138.543 million Americans—or 50% of the population—had tried drugs at some point; 59.277 million, or 21.4%, had used illegal drugs or misused prescriptions in the past year; and 11.7% (32 million people) had used them in the previous month. That includes 2.9 million using marijuana, 2.9 million prescription painkillers, 2.2 million amphetamines, 2.1 million prescription stimulants, 957,000 heroin users, 638,000 cocaine users, and 319,000 using prescribed sedatives. It is not uncommon for individuals to move from prescribed medication to maintaining use via black market sources.

Thus, to understand the evolution of drug trafficking, the attitude of the United States is fundamental; it is its main market. Its shift towards prohibitionism in both opiates and marijuana during the early decades of the 20th century is of great importance: by focusing the problem on supply rather than consumption and preventative policies, it shifted the issue to producing countries. This has even generated an indigenous market in these territories that did not exist before. Similarly, the decriminalisation of marijuana consumption in some US states has also altered the market.

Number of people in the US who used selected illegal drugs in 2018



In short, the term *cartel* was given to the working arrangement in which entrepreneurs shared resources—such as routes—and risks, while managing their businesses separately. As Guillermo Valdés Castellanos (2013) points out in his indispensable work *Historia del narcotráfico en México*¹, the business model of drug trafficking has been the same since its origins. Its key elements are: high profitability that justifies the risks; a criminal structure based on family networks—the family being a source of trust, which is particularly relevant in such businesses—and community networks; and, therefore, due to its deeply rooted nature, a strong presence in the society from which it arose and which would eventually become the economic base of certain regions of the country; violence as a tool for business control, problem resolution, and discipline, as well as for interactions with other organisations.

¹ Its author, whom I know personally, was director of CISEN, the Mexican intelligence services, has inspired the main lines of this article.

In addition, there are criminal actors operating as consultants or independent contractors providing specialised and unconnected services such as money laundering; cybercrime tools; personal security; precursor chemicals; arms trafficking; drug transportation; kidnapping; and even public relations and propaganda (Schulmeister, 2020).

Since this is an economic and business issue, the response should also follow the same logic. Focusing the fight against drugs on external supply and not on internal demand means prioritising a short-term, security-based approach over a public health approach, which, with the applause of national public opinion, leads to the problem being located on the other side of the border and, in doing so, shifts the burden of a fight that benefits the US to Central Americans, since it is in this country where the markets are located and where the real benefits of the struggle are obtained. The key is not so much to reduce supply as to reduce demand, an aspect that is insufficiently addressed, despite its direct effectiveness.

Believing that demand can be eliminated by repressing supply ignores basic economic criteria and has relevant political tolls, as it violates the fundamental rights of the population at source without offering anything in return. Moreover, both the phenomenon and the fight against it undermine the political and economic independence of these states (Cortés, 2020).

Therefore, the undeniable social and development dimension at the source must be addressed. A DEA study highlighted the need to improve education and job opportunities for young people—the basis for recruitment—and stressed that the cartels would continue to grow in personnel even if imprisonment rates were doubled (McDonnell, 2023). *Friendshoring*, the relocation of American investment due to rivalry with China in countries such as Mexico, is a contributing factor in this regard.

In addition, the particular corporate culture of these companies has brought with it the emergence of different cultural movements—gangs are part of this too—known as *narcoculture*. These movements are characterised by their own codes of conduct: dress, appearance, behaviour, and even a religious sentiment with unique features. All of this is captured—sometimes with a hint of glorification—in television series known as *narconovelas* or in *narcoliterature*, and they even have their own music: *narcocorridos*. In fact, the confrontations between organisations resemble more those of medieval warlords than of criminal gangs.

All this lends their actions a legitimising romanticism and serves to reaffirm the culture of violence. This is converted into a dignified *modus vivendi* and a legitimate means of social ascent for which no preparation, education or training is required. This is no small matter, as it is estimated that Mexican cartels must recruit between 350 and 370 people every week to replace the casualties caused by arrests and assassinations (McDonnell, 2023).

Moreover, they also incorporate cutting-edge technology. The dark web plays an increasingly prominent role. Although it emerged less than two decades ago, major players already account for at least \$315 million in annual sales. While this amount represents only a fraction of total drug sales, the trend is growing and has already quadrupled between 2011 and 2017, and again between mid-2017 and 2020 (UNODC, 2021). The DEA's 2024 report places strong emphasis on technological factors, including the use of advanced marketing techniques, cryptocurrencies, and the existence of predominantly Chinese networks for sourcing precursors and laundering money (DEA, 2024).

Fragile states, armed forces and organised crime

The relationship between institutional strength and organised crime is ambivalent. State fragility is key to the expansion of such dynamic phenomena as organised crime. Thus, regions with high poverty rates and weak state structures offer ideal conditions for alternative formulas for enrichment. Organised crime has the capacity to parasitise their structures, undermining their legitimacy and perpetuating the situation. This establishes a symbiotic relationship between poverty, illegal economies and the weakness of an eroded state. It also normalises violence, making it an ordinary resource.

The social dimension of the issue is undeniable, either because it permeates the social body or because it serves as a structural basis for criminal operations. Thus, maras or gangs are linked to organised crime, arms trafficking and drug trafficking (Mejía Medina, 2009). The small-scale trafficking and infractions that these marginal groups engage in contribute to the trivialisation of crime and disregard for the law. This ends up affecting the legitimacy of the state and its credibility.

Moreover, the state reflects the fragility of the society that hosts it. Therefore, strengthening the state is essential to strengthening society. Organised crime also behaves like a parasite—nesting—and depends on the structures of the state. Organised

crime and institutional weakness are two sides of the same coin. Businesses, national and international financial institutions, and public officials inevitably interact with these illegal organisations. However, while corruption operates through the same mechanisms, it is not presented part of organised crime.²

But organised crime, violence and corruption are one and the same and generate a vicious circle. Corruption is the nexus between politics and criminal organisations. Organised crime can only survive if it is able to hang on to the structures of the state, which it thus simultaneously weakens and delegitimises. Corruption, like rust, hollows out the state and makes it inconsistent. It also creates imbalances that allow its best-organised parts—traditionally, the armed forces—to assume an overweight role, which incorporates the risk of militarising public life. Systemic corruption creates a vicious circle that keeps the state in a situation of structural weakness, making it vulnerable and preventing its consolidation.

As mentioned, organised crime is presented in a different way and outside the state, but the two are linked through corruption. Paradoxically, this means that organised crime is also supported and favoured by the structures of the state. Thus, because of corruption, the state simultaneously attacks and supports organised crime. The result of such an unsustainable arabesque is that the prosecution of corrupt activities is ineffective if the institutional foundations that protect and sustain them are not reformed.

In the case of Ibero-America, the perception of corruption in state institutions is significantly high. In this context, the armed forces are more favourably regarded than the police, as they are the only institution with a territorial presence and, not infrequently, the cornerstone on which the political system is built. Additionally, the logic of war favours social control by establishing the precise mechanisms (Cortés, 2020).

Involving the military in the fight against organised crime in a peacetime context helps to legitimise its existence at the cost of, on the one hand, redefining its role and, on the other, prioritising a security-centred—rather than public health—approach to the problem. Furthermore, the prevailing concept of war in public discourse frames the issue in

² See:

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA07_2023_FEDAZN_Corrupcio n.pdf

symmetrical, violent terms with no restraints, despite the fact that the role of the military is to protect the entire population.

In any case, states are called upon to make a restrictive use of violence, as it incorporates a toll in terms of legitimacy and undermines their very essence. The danger lies in the fact that, in addition to the weakness of the state, its use will lead to the fracture of the pact between state and society. Colombian President Gustavo Petro's bid for total peace is radically opposed to the model previously attempted in Mexico and is in line with that followed by López Obrador in his mandate.

Current situation

Mexico, a country of contradictions, is a state of 1,972,550 km² and 126,014,024 inhabitants in 2020. It is a young population with an average age of 29 (25.3% are under the age of 15), of which 43.9% (55.7 million people) live in poverty and 8.5% (10.8 million) in extreme poverty. In fact, 22.5% (28.6 million people) lack access to food. It is the sixteenth largest economy in the world and the second largest in Latin America, with a GDP in 2021 of 1,322.740 billion dollars in 2021.

Eighty-five percent of the country (except the Yucatan Peninsula and the eastern and northwestern coastal plains) is made up of mountain ranges, plateaus and valleys. The Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre Oriental run parallel to its two ocean coasts. Between them lies a vast region of valleys, plateaus and high plateaus at an average altitude of 2,000 metres.

The thriving North American drug market and its demand found the perfect supply in and through Central America. Mexico, as part of Central America, has acted simultaneously as a transit and production zone, given the accumulation of circumstances that concur in the country: the difficulties of its geography and its constants, a weak state and society that have become accustomed to violence, the relative acceptance of criminal practice, inequality and lack of social justice, political structure and culture....

Its case is food for thought. In fact, President Manuel López Obrador himself, who considers corruption to be the cause of the problem, went so far as to describe his country as a *narco-state* when referring to events such as the arrest of the man who was Security Secretary until 2012. And even he and his entourage have been accused by the US press

of having links with the Sinaloa cartel, perhaps for not giving drug trafficking the priority it deserves on his political agenda.

In short, the history is long and has been linked to the attitude of the United States as a market, but also to policies aimed at combating the phenomenon, sometimes unilaterally. Thus, Mexico is held responsible for the fight and repression of drug trafficking, even in the situation of institutional weakness from which the country emerged at the beginning of the 1920s, after the revolution, which forced the adoption of a prohibitionist attitude in this regard.

The Second World War led to an increase in the production of Mexican opiates to satisfy the US demand for morphine. The end of the war led to an excess on the black market, to which marijuana was added after the 1950s, increasing its demand from 1967 onwards. In 1969, President Nixon launched the war on drugs as successive US administrations became increasingly intolerant of the drug trade. This shifted the burden of the fight to Mexico, as was the case with illegal immigration from Central America.

The result was the infiltration of drug trafficking into the structures of the state, its gradual parasitism, from its very origins and starting with its local and federal structures first, and then its entry into politics, thereby generating global pacts that allowed society to remain on the margins, at the price, of course, of the legitimacy of the system as a whole. In this way, the drug traffickers travelled from the local to the state level and, as we shall see, back again, parallel to the country's institutional development.

The lack of a global-level integrated policy, combined with the closure of supply markets like Turkey or the dismantling of heroin labs in France — the basis for the famous film *The French Connection* — propelled the Mexican opiate market, to which marijuana, a product with a growing demand, was added. And from marijuana it evolved, through existing networks and logistics, to cocaine when the United States began to put pressure on Colombia. The *narcos* then diverted the direct Caribbean routes to others that passed through Mexico.

Institutional penetration became much greater as the groups increased in size, with the state lacking resources to resist. The “silver or lead” approach — a practice that, by its nature, goes beyond mere corruption — led, as Valdés Castellanos explains, to a partial state capture, with officials either standing down or leading gangs themselves. That is

why Mexican cartels, unlike American mafia organisations, were not small groups but large and powerful. They carried out state functions in areas where the state lacked control.

In this struggle, which led to the definitive consolidation of the large drug cartels, they turned their particular interests into those of the societies in which they nested. As a result, they supplanted the role of the state, even supplanting the police in the prosecution of other crimes in areas beyond their control. In this way, drug trafficking became both a challenge and a problem of governability and national security. In this struggle, which led to the definitive consolidation of the major drug cartels.

From the 1980s onwards, as Valdés Castellanos points out, the institutional strengthening of the Mexican state made this *de facto* situation unacceptable. This brought the seven most powerful organisations — the Gulf, Sinaloa, Tijuana, Pacific, Zeta, Juárez, La Familia and the Arellano Félix and Joaquín Guzmán groups — into direct confrontation with power. And, unable to sustain themselves at the central level, they moved back to the periphery to capture local powers in regions where they had relative superiority over the state.

From 2006 onwards, there was a decline in drug consumption in the North American market in parallel to the advance of institutional development in a country that was recovering its periphery. This also altered the *status quo* at the local level, when criminal organisations clashed with each other due to the reduction of the available market. It was in this context that President Peña Nieto initiated what was known as the war on drug trafficking, which required the involvement of the armed forces for operational reasons and because they were less infiltrated by drug trafficking than the federal and local police.

Naturally, and given the regional dimension of the problem, this was transferred to Central America through the Merida Initiative signed in 2008. This is an international treaty to combat drug trafficking and organised crime signed by the United States with Mexico and the countries of Central America. As a result, the idea of war became dominant in public discourse. And the next president, Felipe Calderón, was a prisoner of this logic during his six-year term in office.

Following the dialectic of confrontation, the cartels reacted by extending and diversifying their business. They incorporated extortion, kidnapping, fuel theft and immigrant

smuggling.... And, armed even with military-grade weapons, they socialised violence — that is, they involved society as a whole in a conflict that had previously passed them by. They also expanded their operations to countries like Colombia, entering into competition with the established organisations, which had likewise extended their activities to Central America.

As a result, homicides went from 2,819 in 2008 to 17,000 in 2011, although 85% of these were due to fighting between the cartels themselves. In 2019, the first year of López Obrador's presidency, who wanted to end the policy of war on drugs and replace it with other ways of addressing social reasons, 34,608 homicides and 1,012 murders of women were recorded. Some sources estimate the number of homicides at more than 275,000 in 2019 and since 2006 and put the level of impunity for such crimes at 98%.

The problem was a growing number of drug cartels whose strength challenged a state that did not have effective institutions, especially in the areas of security and justice, to face a challenge that could not be postponed. Mexican society could not wait another twenty years to achieve adequate institutional development.

López Obrador's presidency attempted to break with this logic of confrontation through a change in political attitude that was synthesised in the expression *abrazos, no balazos* (*hugs, not bullets*). To this was added the idea of *Mexico first*, which underlined the US's rather than Mexico's interest in the problem of drug trafficking. All in all, it called for institutional reorganisation and the creation of a national guard. However, both have experienced major difficulties and setbacks.

This has led international media to accuse AMLO's government of passivity that has allowed the cartels to expand. Nevertheless, the levels of violence have been maintained, although confirming a change in trend. In 2021, homicides fell to 33,308, only 3.6% less than the previous year. The turnaround was confirmed when they became 30,968 in 2022 and 30,523 in 2023. The homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants dropped from 28 in 2021 to 25 in 2022. By comparison, the rate in the United States was 7.8 per 100,000 population in 2021.

At the same time — and independently — the preferences of the North American market evolved. Cocaine joined marijuana and opiates from the 1990s onwards. But the arrival of fentanyl — a drug with derivatives fifty times more potent than heroin — and other

methamphetamines — a synthetic stimulant — changed the supply, market, and its logic. No longer are there fields to protect and guard, but rather factories using precursors imported from China and India. These are synthetic drugs whose production costs are far lower than plant-based drugs. They are not grown; they are manufactured.

Today, according to the DEA, the drug trafficking landscape is made up of some 150 cartels. The two largest are the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. Both have almost 45,000 members in more than 100 countries.

The United States accuses Mexico of producing fentanyl, which Mexico denies — even as fentanyl seizures, both powder and pill form, reach record levels. Over the past two years, powder fentanyl seizures have nearly doubled, and pill seizures have tripled. Thirty per cent of the fentanyl powder seized by the DEA contained xylazine, an even more dangerous drug used as an animal sedative.

Global and regional implications

Global implications

Globalisation has destroyed the silos of our societies. These new spaces have given rise to new organisations that have merged with old ones or absorbed their members, broadening the range of activities. Thus, globalisation has introduced local organised crime into its logic by projecting it according to global keys, causing local criminal groups to broaden the spectrum of their activities, interacting with the black markets of the West and thereby increasing their economic entity and power.

We are facing a dynamic phenomenon articulated in the form of trafficking (drugs, prostitution, counterfeiting, weapons, resources, people...) involving numerous regions of the world. Organisations engaged in drug trafficking diversify their locations and activities in an attempt to draw comparative advantage from the territories in which they operate and from the territorial and material fragmentation of their activity. These are globally connected, adaptable and atomised organisations, exercising their control not through territorial or state ambitions, but following corporate models.

These groups operate in opposition to the state within a complex criminal ecosystem where rivalries and even (temporary) alliances exist with extra-regional criminal groups such as the Ndrangheta, the Chinese Triads and, at one point, ETA (Hernández, 2021). In fact, a good part of the precursor chemicals used to manufacture drugs in Mexico were sent by some companies from China; something similar happens with fentanyl. To evade control in China, some laboratories have been transferred to India; from there, they are sent to Mexico via Africa without COVID-19 having altered these flows (Hernández, 2021). The governments of the region's countries, for their part, repeatedly complain that drug traffickers obtain weapons in the United States.

In addition, these groups possess extensive structures for money laundering and seek to avoid drawing attention through violence. These corrupt structures, although created by illicit actors, are "implemented by a legion of lawyers, accountants, bankers, intermediaries, administrators and others" (Rickards, 2009). They are known as *invisible* or *narco-ghosts*, who only control the routes and the relationship with the client. They seek strict anonymity, to be confused with ordinary businessmen and, because they have very small structures, they rely on intermediaries who subcontract services (Armenteros Diéguez, 2021).

The perpetrators of violence need associates within legal structures to insert themselves into the global and lawful economy. Criminality exploits corruption to inject illicit financial flows into capital markets, to commit and conceal crimes, and to influence political and judicial spheres, thereby infiltrating legal structures to establish and consolidate its power. Thus, corruption becomes the component of criminality that guarantees the interconnection between the illegal and the legal (Gayraud, 2007).

Money laundering, along with corruption, tax evasion and tax fraud, is part of a shadow economy that is difficult to quantify. It has reached global dimensions; already, in 2012, it ranked among the world's top twenty economies with a volume of USD 870 billion per year, equivalent to 1.5% of global GDP. Meanwhile, according to UN data from 2020, it is estimated that 10% of global GDP is cross-border financial assets, of which illicit money amounts to 1,370 billion euros, equivalent to the GDP of Spain, and 2.7% of the world's wealth; the volume of bribes is estimated at 35 billion euros per year.

Regional implications

If there is one simile of the phenomenon of organised crime in all its forms, it is that of a large water-filled balloon which, when squeezed at one end, bulges at the other end. Any solution implies a regional diagnosis and treatment. And since crime affects a plurality of levels, it is logical to adopt comprehensive and complex solutions.

The weak states that suffer from it are *captive states* that serve as a base of operations, under the protection of international legality, for markets in the developed world (Aguirre *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, the fragility of societies and the state in neighbouring territories facilitates the spread of organised crime to their surroundings, making the problem regional or global in scope and intertwining it with other conflicts.

For example, the destruction of plantations in Colombia led to a proliferation of cultivation in Bolivia and Peru. But also, the violence generated since 2006 by the war on drugs led to an increase in Central America, mainly in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. This is known as *the cockroach effect* (Rodríguez Pinzón, 2006).

With the same logic, some Mexican cartels have expanded their activities from the United States to Colombia. Some authors suggest that the Colombians have ceded the entrepreneurial leadership of the drug business to the Mexicans. But the Colombian cartels did the same and moved northwards.

Indeed, the growth in cocaine production, combined with the atomisation of the Colombian cartels, has caused them to lose power to both the Mexicans, who have settled on Colombia's Pacific coast, and the Venezuelans. Certainly, the presence of Aztec organised crime in Colombia is not new. This has not only translated into the purchase of cocaine, cultivation fields and laboratories, but also into the financing of armed groups. Its penetration occurred in the face of the chaos of the Colombian production market, which made it impossible for Mexicans to guarantee shipments in the quantity, quality and time required by demand, thus generating inefficiencies. Thus, Mexican criminal structures lost confidence in the capacity of their local partners and preferred, taking advantage of the 2016 peace process, to relocate to Colombia and organise their own infrastructure to guarantee a reliable supply to the United States (Ortiz Marina, 2019).

Since 2016, Colombia has also experienced a process of Mexicanisation of violence that does not pose a direct risk to the survival of the state but does weaken it and allows the objective conditions to be established for the situation to be repeated. Criminal groups neither seek power nor aim to destroy the state. In fact, they need it to function, as they require a certain political and legal order to conduct business. To trivialise, therefore, the Mexicanisation of violence is also mistaken and dangerous, as its effects can overflow institutional channels and cause the collapse of the political system, even if that is not the goal or desire of drug trafficking (González Martín, 2017).

Furthermore, the publication of the so-called Panama Papers revealed the relevance of drug trafficking in Central America, which is the main criminal economy and the financial engine of organised crime on a regional scale. The region is a transit and storage area for drugs, as consumption indicators are relatively low compared to the rest of the continent. It is estimated that, in 2011, 90 % of the cocaine reaching the US—accounting for around 86 % of the global total—came through the Central American corridor, leaving an estimated €5.3 billion in illegal profits. This would be equivalent to 5% of the regional GDP.

It is worth highlighting the intertwined trajectory of drug trafficking and the region's political history, for which it represents an opportunity (Cortés, 2020), because the armed conflict experienced in the region since the 1980s provided an ideal scenario for its expansion: a violence that is not associated with its activities and that served to cover them up, but also with very weakened states. As a result, crime in Central America today still has the characteristics of a pandemic. Vulnerable borders, weak state institutions and impunity explain the growth of organised crime in the region. The region is a cocktail of drug trafficking, arms (in 2007, there were an estimated 4.5 million small arms) and gangs.

Homicide rates are close to those of a war. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, countries that make up the so-called Northern Triangle, accounted for around 4.5% of the world's homicides in 2017, despite accounting for around 0.4% of the world's population, although it has fallen significantly since then. Even so, the 2024 Failed States Index ranked Guatemala 65th, Honduras 56th, Mexico 83rd and El Salvador 85th.

According to a 2020 IMF report, the cost of this violence amounts to 16% of GDP. A 2012 World Bank report also estimated that a 5% reduction in the homicide rate would result in a 1% improvement in regional GDP.

While violence characterises the Northern Triangle states, it is the Southern Triangle countries — Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama — that seem more connected to the activity that truly makes the phenomenon profitable: the legalisation of capital through money laundering (Schulmeister, 2020).

In addition to the economic aspects, there are also cultural aspects. The fight against drug addiction has led to a marked tendency towards securitisation and even militarisation of the region. In fact, the war on drugs may have allowed or legitimised, in the name of security, the implementation of exceptional measures contrary to human rights. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, it has meant the *de facto* militarisation of public security. And Costa Rica, a country known for not having armies, has developed a significant militarised security force. And all of this, and in all countries, has been accompanied by the criminalisation of the most disadvantaged social sectors, as structural reasons have been neglected.

Worse still, this has led to the *narcotisation* (Rodríguez Pinzón, 2006) of relations with the United States by introducing the problem into security agendas and conditioning all relations and, significantly, the granting of development aid. This means modulating or conditioning its independence by making the granting of aid conditional on its attitude and sensitivity. In fact, beyond Iran Gate, a closer examination of US *narco-diplomacy* shows that, at times, the war on drugs has served to justify other policies not directly related to it.

In any case, crime in Central America continues to have the characteristics of a pandemic. The vulnerability of borders and the institutional and administrative limitations of some states explain the growth of organised crime in the region, driven by an explosive cocktail of drug trafficking, arms and gangs.

Conclusions and foresight

Drug cartels are highly resilient and territorially embedded organisations that have successfully overcome the stress of the capture of their leaders and use their significant operational capabilities for many different activities around the world from their regional quasi-sanctuaries and interact with other criminal and terrorist groups.

Following illicit money inexorably leads to power, financial centres and politics. And all this in a globalised environment with flows in all directions. Globalisation has closed the world even in its criminal dimensions, generating correlations of all kinds and the rearrangement of both supply and demand.

Drug trafficking does not exist because the drug exists, but because there is a demand that cannot be met lawfully. Thus, in 2022 the Taliban government banned the cultivation of opium in Afghanistan. According to UNODC, this reduced the hectares under cultivation from 233,000 to around 10,800 hectares, so that opium gum production fell to only 300 tonnes. The existence of unsatisfied demand makes it foreseeable that part of the supply will be relocated to countries such as Mexico because of its proximity to one of the centres of demand.

The driver of drug trafficking in Central America is US demand. However, US public opinion, logically, is more accepting of policies that place the problems on the other side of the border. However, to be effective, these policies must be comprehensive, long-term oriented, and do not allow for border criteria. Focusing the fight against drugs on supply and not on internal demand means giving priority to a short-term, security-based approach over a public health approach. This also means ignoring the *intermestic nature* of the problem and shifting the burden of a fight for the benefit of North America onto Central Americans (Cortés, 2020).

The problem, like any public health issue, requires above all time and education, but also the acceptance that it can only be limited and degraded. It means moving from a punitive-criminal approach to a more complex one, which also involves addressing the causes of exclusion and inequality that are its breeding ground, without neglecting operational, police and public safety issues.

It is paradoxical that there was debate over whether Mexico was a failed state when it had in fact reached an institutional development enabling it to face challenges it had long postponed: political logic is paradoxical. The key to overcoming the problem of drug trafficking lies in the development of the Mexican state, so that it assumes control over all areas of its vast territory. Where the state is present, there are no criminal gangs; and where criminal gangs are present, there is no development or prosperity (Ben Ami, 2017).

In any case, states are called upon to make a restrictive use of violence, as it has a toll in terms of legitimacy and its permanent use undermines its essence. The state does not and cannot make war on its society or a part of it. In fact, the war on drug trafficking can *de facto* lead to the criminalisation of the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society, which are the ones who, in practice, commit the crime. For this reason, its overuse in already weak states weakens them even further and adds to the equation the eventual fracture of the pact between state and society.

Involving the armed forces in this struggle in a context of peace contributes to legitimising their existence at the cost, on the one hand, of redefining their role and, on the other, of prioritising a vision of security rather than public health. Moreover, the idea of war, predominant in public discourse, is consubstantial to the armed forces and poses the dispute in symmetrically violent and unrestrained terms, when their *raison d'être* is to protect the entire population. This explains the spirals of violence experienced in some regions in line with the principle of reciprocal action and the rise of *Clausewitzian* extremes. The problems of poverty and equity can hardly be solved by cannon fire.

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