
The Strategic Implications of the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*

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Abstract

Most security analysts now view the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) as the most powerful organized crime group (OCG) in Mexico. This article explores the strategic/security implications of the rise of this new and aggressive group by providing an in-depth historical case study. The case study shows that the CJNG is a highly resilient and geographically dispersed entity that draws upon the experience of its members, which studied under the tutelage of the *Milenio* and Sinaloa cartels. Since 2015 the CJNG has begun “adopting orphan” criminal cells left in the wake of the US and Mexican kingpin strategy and the resulting OCG fragmentations. This demonstrates the limits of kinetic strategies in the drug war as the Mexican drug trafficking system appears to be reconsolidating under the CJNG. Policy reform areas such as legal reform implementation, penal system capacity building, and tax reform goals are discussed.



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ABSTRACT

Most security analysts now view the Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) as the most powerful organized crime group (OCG) in Mexico. This article explores the strategic/security implications of the rise of this new and aggressive group by providing an in-depth historical case study. The case study shows that the CJNG is a highly resilient and geographically dispersed entity that draws upon the experience of its members, which studied under the tutelage of the Milenio and Sinaloa cartels. Since 2015 the CJNG has begun “adopting orphan” criminal cells left in the wake of the US and Mexican kingpin strategy and the resulting OCG fragmentations. This demonstrates the limits of kinetic strategies in the drug war as the Mexican drug trafficking system appears to be reconsolidating under the CJNG. Policy reform areas such as legal reform implementation, penal system capacity building, and tax reform goals are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

While there is some debate, since 2016-17 most security analysts view the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) as the most powerful organized crime group (OCG) in Mexico.¹ This manuscript seeks to explore the strategic and security implications of the rise of this new and aggressive group by providing an in-depth historical case study of the CJNG and its rapid rise since 2010. The case study shows that the CJNG is a highly resilient and geographically dispersed entity that draws upon the knowledge and experience of its members, which was under the tutelage of the Milenio and Sinaloa cartels. Since at least 2015, the CJNG has “adopted orphan” criminal cells left in the wake of the United States and Mexican kingpin strategy and the resulting OCG fragmentations.² This demonstrates the limits of kinetic strategies in the drug war, as the Mexican drug trafficking system appears to be reconsolidating under the CJNG despite a decade of kingpin/high value targeting (HVT). As will be shown, the CJNG is now present to varying degrees in all 32 Mexican states including those along the United States-Mexico border. Further, it is of sufficient size and power that it is capable of confronting and corrupting the Mexican state at the federal, state, and local levels. Despite the group’s importance in Mexican drug trafficking and its implications for US security, there is a dearth of English language peer reviewed articles on the CJNG. Thus, by providing this historical case study and discussing its implications for the kingpin strategy, this article makes a significant empirical contribution to the security studies literature on Mexican organized crime and the kingpin strategy.³

The rise of the CJNG has significant domestic (Mexico), regional, and global security implications. First, counterintuitively the kingpin strategy has created an opportunity for the CJNG to in part reconsolidate Mexican drug trafficking. The implication for Mexico is a CJNG that can consolidate power and profits sufficiently to corrupt and confront the state with impunity at a high level, challenging the state during a delicate election year. Second, the consolidation of the CJNG in Mexico means it will have increased capital and power projection capabilities for regional and global drug markets. In the Western Hemisphere, this will mean increased trafficking distribution in the United States, which will likely result in more corruption attempts of United States agents along the United States-Mexico border and a disruption and/or transition of US domestic drug markets. The CJNG is in a better position to continue displacing Colombian traffickers in the cocaine source region. Globally, the CJNG could use the higher profits and control of ports to capitalize further market penetration in Europe and Asia.

The article will present the historical case study of the CJNG focusing on its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), leadership, recruitment, control of prisons, business model, innovations, geographic spread throughout Mexican territory, new alliance strategies, and a discussion of the causes of Mexican state fragility that has allowed the CJNG rise. It will conclude with lessons learned and policy prescriptions derived from the case, including shifting away from solely kinetic strategies, emphasizing judicial, law enforcement, penal, and tax reforms to address acute resource scarcity for Mexican law enforcement.

CÁRTEL DE JALISCO NUEVA GENERACIÓN (CJNG)

While the Mexican government considered the Sinaloa Cartel the most powerful crime group in Mexico, the Cartel faces a new challenger, the CJNG, which United States and Mexican analysts and law enforcement identified as the only cartel in Mexico on an “expansionary track” since 2015.⁴ The CJNG’s genesis was the 2010 death of Sinaloa Cartel leader Ignacio “Nacho” Coronel who specialized in methamphetamine production in the Jalisco region. Coronel had subsumed the Milenio Cartel under the Sinaloa Federation umbrella in the 2000s and when Mexican Authorities killed him (2010), his operations fragmented into multiple OCGs.⁵

Eventually the CJNG, led by Nemesio “El Mencho” Oseguera Ramos, emerged from this fragmentation as a new and powerful OCG operating in alliance with the Sinaloa Cartel and supported by Los Cuinis financial operators. Most analysts first learned of the CJNG as the MataZetas or Zeta Killers in Veracruz in 2011 when their forces orchestrated a massacre of 35 supposed-Zeta rivals.⁶

At this time, the CJNG appeared to be acting as an independent OCG in alliance with the Sinaloa Cartel effectively functioning like an armed wing as the Zetas had for the Gulf Cartel. Accordingly, leader “Chapo” Guzman, leader of the Sinaloa Cartel sent the Matazetas/CJNG to Veracruz to battle the Zetas for control of lucrative ports. Veracruz has suffered heavy violence since 2010 much of which is attributable to Sinaloa/CJNG/ Gulf Cartel battles with the Zetas.⁷ Authorities discovered a mass grave in March 2017 with 250 young peoples’ bodies. A week later, authorities found dozens more skulls in a separate site, leading the state Attorney General Jorge Winckler to call the state “one big mass grave.”⁸

According to United States and Mexican government officials the CJNG has moved through three phases, the 2010 birth following the fall of Nacho Coronel, the funding and support of self-defense forces in 2012, and the February 2013 split with the Sinaloa Cartel.⁹

The CJNG maintains an alliance—solidified through marriage ties—with the financially powerful Los Cuinis OCG, which the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2015 identified as the wealthiest in Mexico and possessing the best Mexican drug distribution in Canada, Europe, and Asia.¹⁰ El Mencho’s brother-in-law Abigael “El Cuini” Gonzalez Valencia led the organization until his arrest in February 28, 2015 in Puerto Vallarta. The US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Los Cuinis and their alleged business fronts in 2017. The sanctions linked El Cuini and El Mencho through their 2014 co-indictment in a Washington DC federal court.¹¹

The CJNG also attempts to “brand” or market itself as protectors of the people fight violent rivals that prey upon the population.¹² The CJNG likely learned this modus operandi from other organized crime groups such as La Familia Michoacana. La Familia made its public pronouncement by throwing five severed heads onto a dancefloor in Uruapan, Michoacán in 2006. At the scene, La Familia left a written statement describing itself as the protector of the people of Michoacán.¹³ This strategy has become commonplace in Mexico and the CJNG has fought and occasionally appears to ally with La Familia with in some localities in a complex battlespace.¹⁴

In this sense the CJNG is the ultimate amalgam of various Mexican OCGs bringing with it TTPs from, among others, the sophisticated financial networks of Los Cuinis and relationships with Guadalajara money launderers such as the recently OFAC sanctioned Flores DTO that laundered money for both the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel.¹⁵

The CJNG carries the TTPs of the Sinaloa cartel as far as elements of Nacho Coronel’s Sinaloa cartel subset became CJNG traffickers. In the words of retired DEA agent Mike Vigil the “[CJNG] have a Ph.D. in drug trafficking thanks to the education provided by the Sinaloa cartel and other cartels.”¹⁶ The TTPs inherited from precursor OCGs gave the CJNG a running start as it entered the Mexican drug trafficking system after numerous groups were already fully established. Post 2011 the CJNG engaged many alliances or in some cases, annexations, subsuming some groups, sent cells to recruit new cells sometimes of local gangs or local teenagers, for example, the CJNG conflict in Los Cabos with the Sinaloa Cartel, which erupted in 2016 and expanded in 2017.¹⁷ Thus, the CJNG has acquired TTPs not just from its precursor organizations, but likely also from its new allies and adoptions.

From its inception in the 2010 period, many considered the CJNG an armed wing or paramilitary force for the Sinaloa cartel in its nation-wide struggle with the Zetas and the Beltran Leyva Organisation. Since 2013,

it has become increasingly clear the CJNG was its own organization. The relationship between the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel changed publicly in 2016 (had already ruptured in 2013)¹⁸ when two of Chapo Guzman's sons were kidnapped by what many believe to be CJNG gunmen in Puerto Vallarta. It appears Chapo Guzman negotiated their release from behind bars, likely at great cost to trafficking corridors and money.¹⁹

The CJNG attempted an alliance with the forces of Damaso Lopez, but his arrest and his son's surrender to United States authorities in 2017 appears to have diminished that possibility.²⁰ The CJNG allies with La Linea (formerly armed wing of the Carillo Fuentes Organization) against the Sinaloa Cartel and the partners have been pushing into Chihuahua together since 2017.²¹

CJNG LEADERSHIP

Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera Cervantes has led the CJNG since its inception and his biography provides insight into where the CJNG acquired its TTPs and expansion strategies. El Mencho dropped out of school to work in the fields of Michoacán's Tierra Caliente region to support his family. He eventually became a guard for a marijuana crop, but tired of that and left for California's Central Valley, which in the eighties was a major methamphetamine-producing region. United States authorities arrested El Mencho for petty offenses while he passed across the border numerous times with ease in this period.²²

In 1992, El Mencho lived in California and accompanied his brother as a lookout on a drug deal. After the deal was completed, wiretaps indicated El Mencho realized the dealers were in fact undercover agents because the money they used was too neatly stacked suggesting it had come from a bank. He told his brother not to work with them again but three weeks later authorities arrested El Mencho and his brother. While El Mencho had a strong case, the prosecution made a plea for his brother contingent on El Mencho also taking the plea. He agreed and went to a United States prison filled with other Mexican nationals for five years. According to Univision, he later recruited heavily for the CJNG from individuals he served in private prison with in West Texas.²³ He likely discussed criminal activities and made contacts with other OCG groups, learning their modus operandi such as those of US street and prison gangs while there.

After serving his time, United States authorities deported El Mencho back to Mexico in 1997, where he would become a Jalisco State Police officer, suggesting he may have learned counterintelligence TTPs from the state itself. In the early 2000s, he joined the Milenio Cartel, which was a "subsidiary" of the Sinaloa Cartel and ran a team of sicarios (assassins) for Nacho

Coronel. With the 2010 death of Nacho Coronel, El Mencho broke from the Milenio/Sinaloa cartel and targeted all network members that did not leave with him, giving rise to the CJNG.²⁴

State Confrontation

The CJNG has proven itself ready to challenge the government directly. CJNG forces have ambushed police killing more than 15 (April 2015), targeted federal police in ambushes in which five died (March 2015), and even downed a Mexican military helicopter in a direct confrontation (May 2015).²⁵ Mexican government officials claimed in 2013 that the CJNG also supported the Self Defense Forces in the Tierra Caliente region against the Knights Templar (KT).²⁶ Despite the 2015 violence, El Mencho has assiduously maintained a personally low profile. In the words of one DEA agent, “in Mexico you would run into guys who had met Chapo... But not Mencho. He is kind of a ghost.”²⁷

Many analysts predicted this would be the death knell of the CJNG as the government would target its resources against the CJNG and weaken it as it had other cartels. However, as other analysts have pointed out, the CJNG appears to have benefited from the attention of Chapo Guzman’s escape and later re-arrest. Further, the CJNG learned to avoid confrontation and shifted toward more corruption.²⁸

El Mencho is notorious for his use of threats and intimidation against his own men and police. A recent recording surfaced of El Mencho threatening to kill a state police commander and ordering him to get his men to stop targeting the CJNG. The commander is clearly afraid and deferential promising to make phone calls and comply.²⁹

CJNG TTP ACQUISITION

It is important to discuss other examples of cartels and OCG processes from which the CJNG used raw materials to build its network. For example, many drug traffickers in the Tierra Caliente region, recruited felony deportees from the United States, which had experience in US prisons and gangs.³⁰ The CJNG later “adopted” some of these “orphan cells” of organized crime in the region.³¹ In addition, the CJNG sponsored self-defence forces in 2012 against its rivals in the area and the self-defence forces drew upon felony deportee/former US gang members.³² Further, the head of the CJNG spent time in US prison before his deportation to Mexico where he became a Jalisco state police officer before joining the

Milenio Cartel, which in turn became a subsidiary of the Sinaloa Cartel. Finally, the CJNG has forged an alliance in Tijuana with remnants of the Arellano Felix Organisation (AFO/Tijuana Cartel) and now has former AFO members such as El Sammy and El Jimmy trafficking under its umbrella according to an interview of retired California Department of Justice agent Steve Duncan.³³

The CJNG in Puente Grande Prison

Puente Grande is a prison famous for the escape of Chapo Guzman in 2001 and more recently for footage of a CJNG lieutenant Don Chelo, the “Boss of the Puente Grande” hosting a party inside claiming to have control of the prison.³⁴ Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación’s total control of the Puente Grande facility is an example of Mexican state weakness. It is also an opportunity for the CJNG run its operations from the safety of prison, negotiate new OCG alliances, punish rivals, recruit new members, and exchange TTPs.³⁵ Indeed, on December 30, 2017 authorities released one of the original leaders of the Matazetas and CJNG Erick Valencia “El 85” from Puente Grande Prison after serving less than five years in prison. A Mexican federal judge based this ruling on violations of “due process.”³⁶ Despite the advantaged position the CJNG has had in TTP acquisition, it has also aggressively sought new ones on the black market.

CJNG ARMS AND INNOVATIONS

Unlike other Mexican OCGs, which seemed content to use straw-purchasing networks to get firearms and ammunition from the United States market, the CJNG has chosen domestic production. Authorities discovered a clandestine AR-15 manufacturing facility that supplied the CJNG in Guadalajara in 2014. Recent leaked Mexican intelligence reports indicate the CJNG continues to improve its arms manufacturing capabilities and supplies allies fighting the Zetas and Sinaloa cartels.³⁷ The capacity to purchase/manufacture weapons that do not have to be smuggled from the US market is a fascinating new capability for Mexican organized crime leaving only trafficking of ammunition.³⁸ In another example of innovation, a recent arrest of CJNG members revealed the CJNG now has drones with explosives attached, demonstrating a new warfare capacity that appears to mimic Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) TTPs.³⁹

A recent leaked Mexican intelligence (CISEN) report indicates the CJNG has been using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the form of an unstable small bomb with shrapnel (broken nails) known as a papa or potato

for its use in the Colombian civil war by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC Spanish initials).⁴⁰ The report goes on to suggest that demobilized FARC guerrillas may be looking for other job opportunities and may work as mercenaries for the CJNG. Recent DEA interviews have suggested the CJNG may have purchased training from Israelis as well.⁴¹

Corruption

As with all organized crime in Mexico, the CJNG employs the *plata o plomo* strategy in which traffickers give government officials the choice between bribes or bullets. This phrase and “strategy” is so common and utilized by organized crime that it is a cliché. Mass media, film, books describing Colombian traffickers in the 80s used this phrase to describe Colombian cartels. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss the role of corruption as a *modus operandi* with in the CJNG. According to Jalisco State Attorney General Eduardo Almaguer, criminal gangs have been able to corrupt 20% of the Guadalajara municipal police force, and intimidate 70% of the force into not acting against them. According to a captured CJNG gang member, half the Guadalajara municipal police force is on its payroll, with the CJNG paying each between “1000 pesos and 50,000 pesos a month.”⁴² State Attorney General Almaguer also wants judges to take loyalty tests (vetting for corruption).⁴³

Recruitment by Trickery

The CJNG like other OCGs in Mexico has resorted to recruitment by trickery. While in the 90s recruitment was based on higher wages (for the most part), and was more likely to be conscious in nature at least for hit men and traffickers, today many are offered ostensibly legal jobs that later (when force and intimidation can be applied) are revealed to be illegal. For example, a recent Facebook social media campaign offered legal jobs as “bodyguards, security guards, pollsters and even local police” to job seekers.⁴⁴ The CJNG then forced the job seekers to attend cartel-training camps. Similarly, in 2016, without the use of Facebook the CJNG has set up a fake “ghost” business and advertised via fliers forcing applicants to attend training camps in Jalisco. This is consistent with the use of trickery by other groups operating in different regions under the control of the Sinaloa and Arellano Felix Cartels.⁴⁵

Diversification of Criminal Activities

Like other OCGs in this period the CJNG has diversified its portfolio into extortion, kidnap for ransom, petroleum theft, human labor and sex trafficking, etc.⁴⁶ While analysts called OCGs in Mexico in the 90s the

“FedEx” or “DHL” drug delivery services to the United States given their exclusive focus on their “core competency” of drug trafficking, many OCGs have diversified into other areas.⁴⁷ This helps to explain their diverse geographic presence. The CJNG began with its roots in the Milenio Cartel focusing on the exclusive drug transit routes, but due to multiple factors, adapted to other lines of business and other routes in response to state and rival competition, thus the CJNG spread to other geographic and business niches.

THE CJNG GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD IN MEXICO

There is no greater evidence to support the notion of the CJNG as highly resilient and powerful organization than to chronicle its rapid geographic spread throughout Mexico. In a relatively short rise from 2010 to early 2018, the CJNG developed a documented presence in 24 of 32 Mexican states; when including alliances and small cells the count includes all 32 Mexican states.⁴⁸ While this spread has been rapid, it has also been violent as the CJNG battles entrenched OCGs with new allies. Multiple factors contributed to this rapid spread. First, as other analysts such as John Sullivan, Antonio Mazzitelli, and Alejandro Hope have separately pointed out, the CJNG took advantage of United States and Mexican government kingpin strikes, which fragmented the existing OCGs.⁴⁹ This allowed the CJNG to adopt and ally with independent local cells, and the CJNG benefited from state attention on other OCGs. Second, the CJNG had geographic advantages that allowed it to spread in ways that benefited its business and increased its profitability. The central location of Jalisco near the pacific ports of Lazaro Cardenas and Manzanillo allowed the CJNG to ship methamphetamine to the European and Asian markets where profits were higher, and import the chemical precursors for methamphetamine.⁵⁰ The CJNG push into Veracruz against the Zetas could also be viewed in this light as far as the control of Gulf coast port would improve access to international markets. The increasing importance of fentanyl in the US drug market will only make control of these ports more profitable for the CJNG. The control of high profit ports, allowed the CJNG to fund territorial expansion and corrupt government officials. Figure 1 below is a 2015 DEA map demonstrating CJNG areas of dominant influence in Mexico.

In Table 1, the author compiled media descriptions of leaked Mexico’s Center for National Security Investigation (CISEN) intelligence official statements on the geographic presence of the CJNG on a state-by-state basis.

Figure 1. Mexican Cartel Areas of Dominant Influence According to DEA. This map shows areas of cartel dominant influence according to DEA as of 2015.



Source: United States Drug Enforcement Administration (2015) and Beittel, June S. "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations." Congressional Research Services, April 25, 2017. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41576.pdf>.

Table 1. CJNG Presence by State.

STATE	EXCELSIOR	REPORTE INDIGO*	TELEVISIA
Aguascalientes	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	Allied with Knights Templar.	'consolidated'
Baja California	'Control'	CJNG Alliances with El Tigre y Del 28	'consolidated'
Baja California Sur	'Control'	CJNG Alliances with El Tigre y Del 28	'consolidated'
Campeche		Allies with La Familia to fight Gulf Cartel.	

Table 1 (continued)

STATE	EXCELSIOR	REPORTE INDIGO*	TELEVISA
Chiapas	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	Allies with La Familia to fight Gulf Cartel.	'consolidated'
Chihuahua	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	CJNG Alliances with La linea (Los Linces or Nuevo <i>Cártel de Juárez</i> (NCDJ)), La Gente Nueva, Los Cabrera and Los Artistas Asesinos	
Ciudad de Mexico	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	CJNG Allies with 'La Familia Michoacana, La Empresa, Guerreros Unidos, Cartel de Tláhuac and La Band of 'El Gallito.'	
Coahuila		CJNG Alliances with <i>Cártel del Poniente</i> (CDP) y/o De La Laguna (CDL).	
Colima	'Control'	'Full Dominion'	
Durango		CJNG Alliances with <i>Cártel del Poniente</i> (CDP) y/o De La Laguna (CDL).	
Guanajuato	'Control'	'Full Dominion'	'consolidated'
Guerrero	'Control'	'Full Dominion'	'consolidated'
Hidalgo			'consolidated'
Jalisco	'Control'	'Full Dominion'	'consolidated'

Table 1 (continued)

STATE	EXCELSIOR	REPORTE INDIGO*	TELEVISA
Mexico	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	CJNG Allies with 'La Familia Michoacana, La Empresa, Guerreros Unidos, Cartel de Tláhuc and La Band of 'El Gallito.'	'consolidated'
Michoacan	'Control'	'Full Dominion' also allies with Knights Templar	
Morelos			'consolidated'
Nayarit	'Control'	'Full Dominion'	'consolidated'
Nuevo Leon	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	Allied with Knights Templar against the Zetas and Gulf Cartels	'Significant Expansion'
Oaxaca		Allies with La Familia to fight Gulf Cartel.	'consolidated'
Puebla	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	CJNG allies with 'Totonacapán Cartel,' a group led by 'El Toñín' and a splinter cell from the 'El Bukanas' group, to fight the Sinaloa Cartel.	'Significant Expansion'
Queretaro	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	Allied with Knights Templar.	
Quintana Roo	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	CJNG Alliances with Los Pelones and Los Talibanes	'consolidated'

Table 1 (continued)

STATE	EXCELSIOR	REPORTE INDIGO*	TELEVISA
San Luis Potosi	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	Allied with Knights Templar.	'consolidated'
Sinaloa	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'		
Sonora		CJNG Alliance with Los Salazar and Los Memos against El Mayo	
Tabasco		Allies with La Familia to fight Gulf Cartel.	
Tamaulipas	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	CJNG Alliance with Zetas Operative Group (GOZ) and the Zetas Special Forces (FEZ) and former Gulf Cartel Cells Los Metros and Los Dragones.	'consolidated'
Tlaxcala		Allied with Knights Templar.	'consolidated'
Veracruz	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'	'Full Dominion' and CJNG allies with 'Totonacapán Cartel,' a group led by 'El Toñín' and a splinter cell from the 'El Bukanas' group, to fight the Sinaloa Cartel.	'Significant Expansion'

Table 1 (continued)

STATE	EXCELSIOR	REPORTE INDIGO*	TELEVISIA
Yucatan	'CJNG is disputing leadership with rivals or has an alliance'		
Zacatecas			'Significant Expansion'

Notes: *Reporte Indigo argues sources describe CJNG cells in every state in Mexico. Author's elaboration based on the following sources. **Author's elaboration (Translations of Spanish terms by author).

Sources: Lemus, 'CJNG: La Expansion'; 'Opera El Cartel Jalisco En 22 Estados Del País,' 22; 'Revelan Mapa de La Expansión Territorial Del CJNG.'

In addition to its expansion in Mexico, the rise of the CJNG as a regional and global actor will have broad security implications. In the United States, DEA maps from 2015 and 2017 show an increasing United States presence.⁵¹ Further, recent reports demonstrate an FBI kidnapping investigation in Texas had suspected CJNG links.⁵² These trends suggest the CJNG will continue its market penetration into the United States, possibly supplanting the now weakened Sinaloa Cartel in the context of wholesale drug distribution markets. This could have implications for gang violence in distribution hubs such as Chicago, Dallas, and beyond. The CJNG profits and increased presence along the Mexican Border States could also mean increased attempts to corrupt US law enforcement. Regionally, the CJNG has been identified as one of three Mexican OCGs (Zetas, Sinaloa and CJNG) attempting to supplant Colombian traffickers within Colombia according to Fernando Quijano, a famous Medellin crime analyst, who recently resigned due to death threats. This suggests, as Bunker argues, that the CJNG is increasing its levels of vertical integration/ability to concentrate profits, and will use this power projection capability to expand its global operations in Europe and Asia.⁵³

CJNG ALLIANCE INNOVATION

One innovation that the CJNG has brought to bear to Mexican trafficking is the ability to fight a group in one location, but maintain an alliance or

at least communication against common enemies in another area. One such examples is as an alliance with Zetas Vieja Escuela against rival Zeta faction Cartel de Noreste in the northern border region, despite fighting Zetas for Veracruz. This will likely lead to transfers of sophisticated TTPs as the Zetas ally with the CJNG and specific Zeta splinter cells such as Zeta Fuerzas Especiales join the CJNG. The CJNG also formed a group called Los Combos to take Cancun from the Sinaloa cartel with the Gulf Cartel, Zetas, Guerreros Unidos, and Los Pelones in 2015.⁵⁴

In 2013, the CJNG reached an agreement with El Pez of La Familia Michoacana in the Tierra Caliente region.⁵⁵ The CJNG since appears to have an alliance with La Familia rival Guerreros Unidos in 2015.⁵⁶ The Guerreros Unidos affiliate with another local group known as Los Tequileros, which operate in Guerrero. Los Tequileros and El Pez a La Familia leader have been at odds since both groups' inception roughly (2012) because Los Tequileros split from La Familia. There are multiple possible explanations for this seemingly contradictory CJNG alliance including: (1) CJNG allied with Guerreros Unidos in 2015 and dropped La Familia, (2) it found a way to affiliate with both, (3) it stays out of the local conflict but supports both.

The CJNG would not be the first Mexican OCG to engage in these types of agreements. Sullivan and Elkus, presciently point to the Zetas-MS13, flexible alliance structure as something other groups could potentially replicate.⁵⁷ The 3rd GEN Gang warfare literature points out MS-13 cells also likely increase in sophistication and training due to their contact with the Zetas.⁵⁸

The Zetas and Gulf cartel have announced an alliance to attack the CJNG in Veracruz in July 2017, suggesting a rupture that could have implications nation-wide, if the CJNG is not able to continue its pattern of locally adaptive agreements.⁵⁹ The work of Irina Chindea has presciently pointed to the importance of alliances and balancing among OCGs in Mexico and beyond. As the United States and Mexican governments continue to promote the kingpin strategy, the ability of OCGs such as the CJNG to form alliances may partially explain its rapid expansion.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the ability of OCGs such as the Zetas and Gulf Cartel or La Nueva Familia Michoacana (formed in 2016) which has absorbed CJNG enemies, may partially explain the impossibility of total OCG consolidation.⁶¹

ADDRESSING MEXICAN STATE FRAGILITY

Mexican state fragility in various sectors has enabled the CJNG expansion.⁶² One key issue at play is tax structure, which fails to fund the law enforcement apparatus adequately. As the figure below

demonstrates, as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), Mexico raises little in taxes compared to United States and Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) averages. This leaves Mexican police salaries dangerously low and law enforcement susceptible to bribes.⁶³

Mexico must increase its collection of tax revenue as a percentage of GDP if it hopes to fund effective law enforcement institutions. However, Mexican elites appear satisfied with the status quo. In December 2017 congress passed and President Peña Nieto signed a new Internal Security law which formalizes the role the military has played in the drug war over the last decade.⁶⁴ The crutch of the military in the drug war risks creating a permanently atrophied law enforcement system.

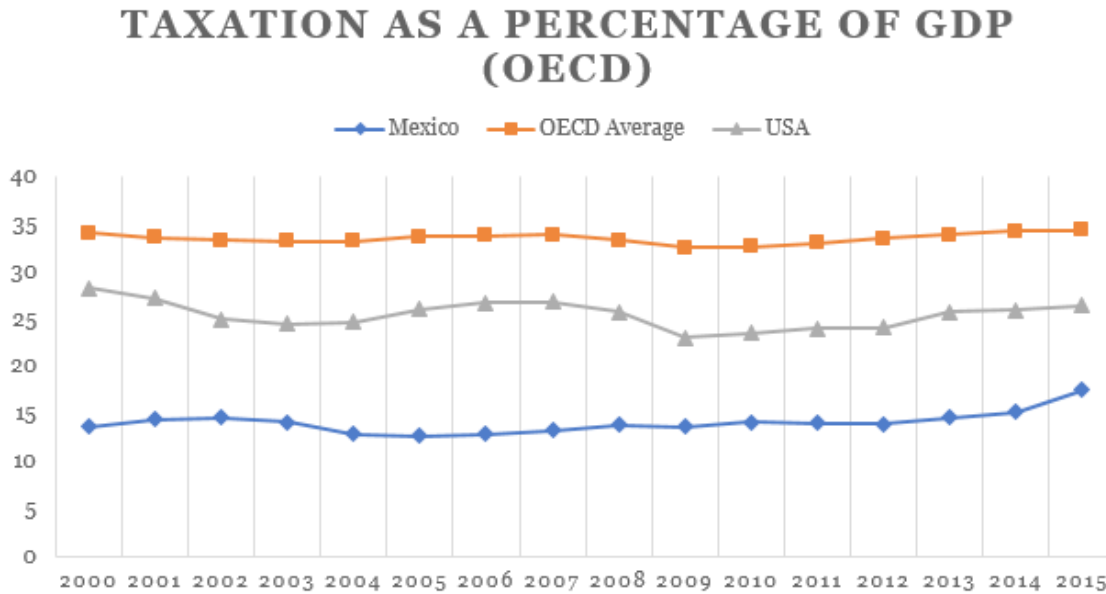
Mexico must focus its efforts on properly implementing the judicial reforms it passed nearly a decade ago, and capacity building within law enforcement and the penal system.⁶⁵ The United States and Mexico should deepen cooperation on organized crime and reforms within Mexico given the importance of their shared border and trade relationship. Increased cooperation will also serve to diffuse rule of law norms within Mexico and Mexican law enforcement.⁶⁶ United States prisons can also serve as models and training facilities for Mexican penal system officials. Indeed, under later iterations of the 2007 United States-Mexico Security Cooperation agreement known as the Merida Initiative, the focus shifted from military equipment to capacity building.⁶⁷ In 2018 Merida Initiative funds are nearly dry, and there is no new agreement up for discussion as the Trump administration raises the specter of changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

CONCLUSION

The rise of the CJNG has regional and global security implications. In the United States, this means increased attempts to corrupt US law enforcement, a shift in the suppliers in the wholesale drug market leading to disruptions and possibly violence, and potential increases in crimes such as kidnapping and extortion. The CJNG is pushing to dominate the Colombian market, increasing its profit potentials and ability to project itself globally including more deeply into European and Asian drug markets.

The ability of the CJNG to absorb fragmented cells of other OCGs and their TTPs in the wake of United States-Mexico kingpin strikes does not bode well for the long-term efficacy of solely kinetic operations in the

Figure 2. Author elaboration generated from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD data export tool on website.



Source: "Tax - Tax Revenue - OECD Data." *The OECD*, March 2018. <http://data.oecd.org/tax/tax-revenue.htm>.

drug war. Policymakers and law enforcement should consider kinetic operations in the context of broader strategies to strengthen Mexican government institutions, especially those related to strengthening law enforcement, the judiciary, and the penal system.⁶⁸ The kingpin strategy has had the counterintuitive effect of allowing the CJNG to gather up fragmented trafficking cells and rapidly expand.⁶⁹ Strengthening Mexican state institutions is the single most important factor in addressing the CJNG and this will require increased tax revenues, and deeper United States cooperation on security and judicial issues. Without the ability to establish a deterrent effect through effective institutions, the Mexican government and society will continue to suffer high levels of violence and state fragility in the face of powerful OCGs such as the CJNG.⁷⁰ As Mexico enters a 2018 Presidential campaign cycle following its most violent year on record in the drug war, it must become as adept at absorbing the rule of law norms of its northern neighbor as the CJNG has been at adopting the TTPs and territories of its progenitors, allies, and rivals.⁷¹

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