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# CENTRAL AMERICA: Gangs are regional security challenge

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## Abstract

Regional gangs

On the occasion of the inauguration of Panama's new President Juan Carlos Varela yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry met presidents and foreign ministers of Central American countries to discuss cooperation strategies to address the crisis triggered by the surge of child migration from the region to the United States. The meeting builds on the late June summit of the Central American Integration System (SICA) where a commitment to work together to reduce migrants flows and improve related security was agreed.

## Full text

SUBJECT:Regional gangs

SIGNIFICANCE:On the occasion of the inauguration of Panama's new President Juan Carlos Varela yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry met presidents and foreign ministers of Central American countries to discuss cooperation strategies to address the crisis triggered by the surge of child migration from the region to the United States. The meeting builds on the late June summit of the Central American Integration System (SICA) where a commitment to work together to reduce migrants flows and improve related security was agreed.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

Gang growth in 'Northern Triangle' countries raises the risk of spillover into more peaceful countries (Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama)

In many countries in the region, gangs outnumber police forces.

Security forces, prisons and judicial systems are underfunded and susceptible to corruption.

Ongoing financial support for an extended period of time from the United States and EU will be crucial to regional initiatives.

Violent crime has been a rising problem in Central America since the 1990s -- particularly in the last decade in Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador). This is the result of two main factors: the region's position on the drug trafficking route from South to North America and the proliferation of multinational street gangs -- the Maras.

The main gangs -- Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18) -- originated in the United States in the 1980s among young migrants fleeing civil conflict in the region. They were initially comprised mainly of Salvadorans, but later also of Hondurans and Guatemalans. Following the end of the conflicts from the early 1990s, convicted youths -- many of them Mara members -- were deported back to their countries of origin. The gangs expanded rapidly throughout the region.

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2012 there were 20,000 Mara members in El Salvador, 12,000 in Honduras and 22,000 in Guatemala: but estimates vary. In 2012 the US State Department estimated the Maras' total membership in the three countries at 85,000 (30,000 more than the UNODC estimate).

Activities .

The Maras are involved in a variety of criminal activities, including:

extortion, particularly of small businesses and transport systems, robbery, muggings, abductions, people smuggling, arson and violent crime;

murders, generally carried out as part of gang-on-gang warfare, although civilians are frequently caught in the crossfire, or attacked as part of extortion or arson attacks; and

drug distribution in their areas of influence, and -- more recently -- national and transnational drug trafficking, as the Maras have moved up the chain.

Structural evolution.

The structure of the Maras has tended to be relatively loose and disorganised, based around local territory and criminal activities -- almost like a 'franchise' structure. Various groups operate as MS-13 or M-18 in different municipalities but have little contact with other group cells (known as 'clicas'). This largely horizontal structure has allowed for rapid proliferation of clicas.

However, in recent years this situation appears to be evolving towards greater centralisation. There has always been occasional ad-hoc contact between group cells, stemming from personal links. Nowadays, greater co-operation between the gangs on a national and regional basis indicate that the Maras are becoming transnational organisations.

An example of greater centralisation was noticeable in El Salvador. The April 2012 negotiated truce between MS-13 and M-18 would not have been enforceable with the looser structure of the previous decade. While the truce has now largely dissolved, this does not appear to be the result of a loss of control on the part of the

leadership, but a conscious decision ( see EL SALVADOR: Fragile gang truce in run-up to election - April 26, 2013).

Current US-Mexico links.

The links between Northern Triangle countries and the United States remain, both through familial contacts and through the high number of deportations to Central America. Northern Triangle countries consistently receive the highest number of US deportees after Mexico, many of whom are Mara members.

	Registered deportees	Criminal deportees (%)
Honduras	32,464	43.7
Guatemala	40,498	35.2
El Salvador	19,694	46.1

**US deportations in 2012**

Source: US Department of Homeland Security

Furthermore, the growing involvement of the Maras with transnational drug trafficking networks moving through the region towards the United States has facilitated cooperation between different group cells. Mexican cartels are present in Northern Triangle countries and have made contact with Mara groups, hiring them to provide protection, transport drugs or carry out violent attacks against rival traffickers ( see CENTRAL AMERICA: Violence signals Mexican influence - October 24, 2013). As a result, the groups are more cohesive and active on a broader territorial scale, while payments in kind of drugs and

weapons have increased their firepower and drug distribution.

Countries' responses.

The different anti-gang strategies adopted by Central American countries have made it difficult to implement a cohesive regional policy.

Northern Triangle countries.

In these countries the approach has focused on deterring criminal activity through a heavy military presence. Although initially effective in the early 2000s, such policies did not address the drivers of violent crime, such as high levels of poverty and youth unemployment, alongside high illegal weapons proliferation and weak institutions, particularly the police and the judiciary. The gangs have responded to this approach with increased brutality and expanding into less visible forms of crime, such as extortion and drug trafficking ( see HONDURAS: New government confronts security challenges - April 8, 2014).

Costa Rica, Panama and Nicaragua.

In these less violence-afflicted countries the emphasis has been on preventive approaches, as well as rehabilitation measures. In these countries Mara membership has remained low, although Northern Triangle groups have sought to set up a presence in connection with drug trafficking activities.

Outlook.

Regional anti-gang efforts have been sporadic, and more effective in terms of legislation than security force cooperation. SICA countries aim to harmonise their counter-organised crime legislation so as to prevent criminals moving between countries to escape penalties and facilitate information sharing on convicted criminals. Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama and -- in the Caribbean -- the Dominican Republic have approved this initiative; ratification from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras is pending.

Improving border security would also help to disrupt the Maras' transnational activities, including drug trafficking and people smuggling. With US funding, a joint task force is already operational on the Mexico-Guatemalan border. Similar joint initiatives with El Salvador and Honduras have been discussed. However, funding remains a concern: cash-strapped governments are unlikely to be able to afford the large-scale

policing resources required to disrupt cross-border criminal activity permanently.

CONCLUSION: Addressing the problem of Central America's gangs (Maras) is a key hurdle for the implementation of regional security initiatives, as escaping violence is an important migration trigger. In turn, the unprecedented levels of child migration through Central America have increased the Maras' potential for extortion and forced recruitment into the gangs' youth cells. The Maras have so far survived attempts to curb their activities, including military-led crackdowns and negotiated truces. The lack of a coherent multinational approach will continue to hinder efforts to improve security throughout the region.

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