GDPO Global Drug Policy Observatory
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Not so FAST;

The Rise and Rise of the DEA's Commando Squads

Subject[1]

The US Drug Enforcement Administration's Foreign-Deployed Advisory Support Teams (FAST) are made up of heavily armed DEA special agents trained in Special Forces-style tactics, and their official objective is to build criminal cases against drug traffickers and undertake interdiction operations. The first team began operating in Afghanistan in 2005. After 2009 the programme expanded and reports suggest five teams are currently active, one of which remains stationed permanently in Afghanistan, the others based in Virginia and operating in the Western Hemisphere - in Honduras, Haiti, Guatemala, Belize, and the Dominican Republic. It seems likely, given the statements of officials, that their remit will at some point be expanded to include West Africa.[2]

US officials justify the teams as an important part of "counter narco-terrorism" operations. In Afghanistan officials have made clear that FAST members target insurgency-linked traffickers exclusively; they are consequently a funding-focused counter-insurgency force, not a counter-narcotics force. In Central America, FAST is a component of the remilitarisation of the region by Washington justified on grounds of 'counter narco-terrorism' and disrupting 'cartels' trafficking drugs.

On investigation it is clear that the FAST programme is one aspect of a wider effort to militarise allied governments; ensure the continuation of preferred approaches to the drug issue; and deepen US military influence overseas. The programme risks generating greater confrontations in regions often beset by violence; emboldening security forces with dire records of human rights abuse; and contributing to the continued shift of trafficking routes, while the issues at the core of the problem remain unaddressed, if not exacerbated by broader US policies.

Significance

The implications of militarised domestic law enforcement agents operating in a military-style capacity overseas are troubling. The New York Times is right to point out that the creation and expansion of the DEA's "commando-style squads" signifies one more step in "blurring the line between law enforcement

1 This Situation Analysis is a modified excerpt from a forthcoming report on the concept of 'counter narco-terrorism' and the militarisation of the DEA

2 Charlie Savage and Thom Shanker, *U.S. Drug War Expands to Africa, a Newer Hub for Cartels*, New York Times, 21 July 2012 - http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/world/africa/us-expands-drug-fight-in-africa.html?_r=3&hp&

and military activities, fusing elements of the 'war on drugs' with the 'war on terrorism.'"[3] The same can be said of the notion of 'counter-narco-terrorism', which has emerged as the predominant means used to justify the expansion of the teams, a continued focus on militarised interdiction, and the militarisation of Central American governments.

Analysis

According to Michael Braun, a former Chief of Operations at the DEA and one of the founders of the FAST programme, the Afghan team was created in 2005 following a request from US Special Operations Command, which wanted assistance "building criminal cases against Afghan drug traffickers with ties to the Taliban."[4] The team has the following tasks: "[to] plan and conduct special enforcement operations; train, mentor, and advise foreign narcotics law enforcement units; collect and assess evidence and intelligence in support of US and bilateral investigations."[5] While building their cases against traffickers, FAST members are free to use "informants, [undercover] operations, interdiction operations, financial investigations, and telephone intercepts". The Afghan-based operatives, who focus exclusively on insurgency-linked traffickers, are justified on grounds of "counter narco-terrorism" and are closely integrated with the military campaign. Quoting Braun: "virtually all counter narco-terrorism operations are now conducted by the DEA jointly with the U.S. Military Special Forces, Afghan Army Commandos and the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan" and the local team are "responsible for providing counter narco-terrorism support to the remote U.S. Military Forward Operating Bases spread throughout the country."[6] Given the mandate, it is unsurprising that FAST members are often ex-military; Richard Dobrich, the current head of the programme, is a former US Navy Seal. Armed like soldiers, FAST members are trained like them too: before being sent overseas they undergo an 18-week regime hosted by US Special Operations that includes training in "close quarter combat, shooting, surveillance detection, small unit tactics, combat lifesaving, IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) and demolitions identification, counter-threat driving, land warfare, escape and evade methods, convoy operations, and counter-narcotic tactical police operations."[7]

In 2009, the Afghan team drew some attention after they were involved in the capture of a well-known drug trafficker and supporter of the Taliban named Haji Bagcho. Capitalising on the high-profile arrest, the DEA requested funding from congress to expand the programme.[8] The funding was granted. While the focus is on interdiction, the teams tasks and level of involvement do not seem to be uniform across their areas of operation. According to available information, in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, for example, FAST members are based in-country for just a few weeks, operating helicopters and fixed wing aircraft with the sole aim of tracking and intercepting drug flights.[9] FAST agents have also been involved in interdictions around the coast of West Africa, although there is as yet no evidence they operate in the same capacity as elsewhere.

In June 2012 a FAST operative shot and killed a suspected drug trafficker while on a mission with local Honduran forces. Operatives are restricted to using their weapons only in self-defence or if their local counterparts are attacked. According to a US embassy spokesman the victim had reached for a holstered gun during the operation in which four individuals were arrested and 360 kilograms of cocaine seized, leading the US embassy to call it "a great example of positive US-Honduran cooperation." A month later FAST agents killed another suspected trafficker in equally murky circumstances. Self-defence was again the justification. Those killings had followed a more prominent incident in May, near the village of Ahuas,

3 Charlie Savage, *D.E.A. Squads Extend Reach of Drug War*, New York Times, 6 November 2011 - http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/world/americas/united-states-drug-enforcement-agency-squads-extend-reach-of-drug-war.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

4 Mattathias Schwartz, *A Mission Gone Wrong*, New Yorker, 6 January 2014 - http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/06/a-mission-gone-wrong?printable=true&currentPage=all

5 Richard Dobrich, Presentation to NDIA SO/LIC Symposium, Available online here- http://www.dtic.mil/ndia/2011SOLIC/Tues2Dobrich.

6 Michael Braun, Responses to Senate Drug Caucus, Available online here - http://www.drugcaucus.senate.gov/Michael-Braun-QFR.pdf

7 Dobrich ; Savage, New York Times, 2011; Schwartz, New Yorker, 2014

8 BBC, *Taliban-funding Afghan drug lord jailed for life in US*, 12 June 2012 - http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-18414075

9 Overview of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America: Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First session, 1 March 2007; There has been some controversy surrounding the DEA's aviation division in Afghanistan, which is responsible for moving FAST members around the country: Marisa Taylor, *Agents Say DEA is Forcing Them Illegally to Work in Afghanistan*, McClatchy, 21 June 2009 - http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2009/06/21/70386_agents-say-dea-is-forcing-them.html?rh=1

when a group of civilians travelling along a river at night were fired upon by Honduran forces officially being advised, although evidence has since suggested it was more like led, by FAST operatives.[10] Four innocent people were killed in the attack. Villagers told reporters that after the shooting had subsided local forces and "English-speaking commandos" swept the area, breaking into homes and handcuffing residents.[11]

The killings caused outrage in Honduras; protestors in the region demanded the DEA be expelled from the country. But in standard Special Forces tradition there has been no accountability for deaths in which FAST members played both direct and indirect, although still substantial roles. In the May 2012 case the DEA has refused to cooperate fully with the Honduran investigation.[12] As in other theatres, the US has consciously tried to avoid accountability for its forces. US helicopters operating in Honduras, for example, fall under the remit of the State Department and counter-narcotics operations, rather than the military, and foreign pilots are used to avoid restrictions on weapon use applicable to US military forces - during the fatal operation in May, FAST operatives and local forces were accompanied by US State Department helicopters equipped with machine guns and piloted by Guatemalans. If past experience is a guide there will be no repercussions for the US agents. At the core of the problem is the team's legal status: FAST members are DEA agents, but they are trained like soldiers, armed like soldiers, often used to be soldiers, and are more free to use their weapons than US soldiers in-country, who are only permitted to open fire in self-defence outside of war zones. In a slideshow presentation to a symposium on Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, Richard Dobrich confronts the critical question: "Is it a law enforcement mission or is it a military mission?" And he answers succinctly and enthusiastically: "Both!!!" Policing and warfare are therefore conflated into the same thing, with one core implication: US domestic law enforcement agencies are acting like the military overseas, even in countries not officially at war.

The menacing skull and trident patch worn by FAST members.

Justified as part of a fight against drug traffickers, "the US under Bush and Obama has ramped up security spending to levels not seen since the 'dirty wars' of the 1980s, in what amounts to the remilitarisation of Central America," notes one commentator writing this year in the London Review of Books.[13] FAST is one element of this policy push. And while FAST is relatively new, it is not novel. It is in fact a rehash, or even an upgrade, of an old program developed by the DEA during the 1980s called 'Operation Snowcap'.[14] Begun in 1987, Snowcap sent DEA Special Agents with military training to Latin America to work with local police forces. Like FAST, the focus was on disrupting organisations and transport routes: Snowcap operatives conducted interdiction operations, and destroyed cocaine processing facilities and landing strips in collaboration with local forces. US Special Forces assisted with the training of local forces but didn't accompany them on missions: that was left to the DEA. Snowcap showed extremely poor results in counter-narcotics terms, but the reason for its eventual cancellation was security related: DEA agents were too often being placed in confrontation with guerrilla forces and drug traffickers. Modern FAST operatives are essentially more heavily armed and better-trained versions of their Snowcap predecessors.

10 Notes the New York Times: "It is routine for D.E.A. agents who are assigned to mentor the specially trained and screened units to accompany them on raids, but it has been unusual for Americans to kill suspects. Several former agents said the recent cases in Honduras suggested that the D.E.A. had been at the vanguard of the operations there rather than merely serving as advisers in the background." Charlie Savage and Thom Shanker, New York Times, 2012.

11 AP, *US Military Expands its Drug War in Latin America*, 2 February 2013 - http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/02/03/us-expands-drug-war-latin-america/1887481/

12 Schwartz, New Yorker, 2014

13 John Perry, The Nicaraguan Model, London Review of Books, 11 July 2014 - http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/07/11/john-perry/the-nicaraguan-model/

14 A US trainer who worked on the Snowcap program notes: "the current administration is moving forward with a similar counter-narcotics surge effort in Afghanistan. The principle remains the same, only the location and the flavor of the drugs has changed." Bob Hartman, Inside DEA; Operation Snowcap, Trafford Publishing, 2011.

Concerns

The emergence – or the re-emergence - of Special Forces-style DEA agents engaged in interdiction operations overseas is problematic for a number of reasons.

The rhetoric of 'counter narco-terrorism' used to justify FAST is a convenient amalgam of the War on Drugs and War on Terror that allows for a continued focus on militarised interdiction, recognised as one of the most ineffective and cost-inefficient means of confronting the drug trade.[15] The other justification for FAST – 'attacking' and 'disrupting' drug trafficking organisations - has opaque metrics of success, distinct from levels of drug production. Old policies can therefore be continued while avoiding criticism they are 'failing' according to conventional measures.[16] Occasional captures of high-level members of drug trafficking organisations are meanwhile presented as great successes, though it is well understood such operations do not have any significant impact on the drug trade.

- The FAST programme is unashamedly political, exclusively targeting official enemies of the US; Richard Dobrich lists the following organisations as part of the "Drug/Terrorism Nexus" with which FAST is ostensibly concerned: "FARC, AUC, Hizballah, Hamas, al-Qa'ida, Al-Shabaab". A largely futile effort by US officials to link drug trafficking groups and organisations deemed terrorist has accompanied the expansion of the program.
- The use of FAST, and the focus on 'attacking' drug trafficking organisations, distracts from the broader context, including the role the US has played, for example in Honduras, in contributing to a socio-economic landscape in which drug production and trafficking can flourish.
- FAST operatives work closely with repressive local security forces; operate under an opaque legal interpretation; bring military-style operations to countries not at war; and have faced no ramifications for their involvement in a number of civilian deaths.
- The most likely outcome of militarised interdiction is a displacement of trafficking routes, with all the usual residual effects. An increase in violence should also be anticipated as the trafficking organisations come under attack[17]; understandably, the Mexican government has refused to allow a FAST presence on their territory. A genuine concern with the drug issue would look at the most efficient evidence-based approaches to reduce the harm of the illicit market, and would require the rollback of other US policies that contribute to an environment conducive to production and trafficking.

15 See, for example, the following studies from the Snowcap era by the RAND Corporation, essentially the think-tank of the US Department of Defense. The conclusions they reached have only been confirmed in subsequent years; RAND, The Limits and Consequences of U.S. Foreign Drug Control Efforts, 1992 - http://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP135.html; RAND, Controlling Cocaine; Supply vs Demand Programs, 1994 - http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/RAND_MR331.pdf

16 Notwithstanding the inadequacy of conventional measures of assessing the success of counter-narcotics operations.

17 Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Focused deterrence, selective targeting, drug trafficking and organised crime:Concepts and practicalities, Brookings Institute, February 2013* - http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/reports/2013/03/drug%20law%20enforcement%20felbabbrown/drug%20law%20enforcement%20felbabbrown.pdf

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