Post-Cold War counterinsurgency (COIN) in Latin America has gone through a subtle, yet significant transformation. To understand this transformation, a short discussion of COIN in the region during the Cold War era is necessary.

In general, counterinsurgency went through three stages. An initial phase occurred during the 1960s when the United States provided relatively unconditional military aid to countries pursuing counterinsurgency campaigns against Cuban inspired *focos*. The emphasis was largely military and tactical. This was followed by a stage of general US disengagement as a consequence of the overthrow of democratic regimes by Latin American militaries and subsequent brutal campaigns in the 1970s against urban guerrilla movements. The continuing focus on the military and tactical aspects of counterinsurgency, combined with the perception of the insurgents as agents of foreign powers, led to strategies focused on the physical elimination of the enemy combat force as the strategic condition for victory. Because insurgents did not wear uniforms, civilian supporters of the insurgents were considered fair game, and many were killed, tortured and imprisoned as a result. Both the US government and Latin American militaries suffered considerable loss of legitimacy due to this approach.

This actually opened up political space for insurgents in some countries, particularly in Central America. After the revolutionary triumph in Nicaragua in 1979, and the emergence of much stronger insurgencies following variants of Mao’s prolonged war, the United States re-engaged. While much of the focus continued to be on the military aspects of the campaign, there was recognition that local conditions, such as political exclusion, were creating fertile ground for the recruitment of people to insurgent causes. This time the United States provided significant political and economic assistance in addition to military aid conditioned on significant political reform to include democratization and respect for human rights. All of the insurgencies after Nicaragua failed to take power. However by the end of the Cold War, every country in Latin America, with the exception of Cuba, had adopted democratic government.

Despite this, insurgency refused to disappear. The end of the Cold War terminated outside intervention and support for insurgency, and democratization supposedly ended political motives for insurgency, but there were still a number of groups that continued to hold out, despite the changes: in Guatemala, Chile, Colombia and Peru. The former two were impossible to sustain as their existence responded to Cold War dynamics that no longer existed. Mostly the groups prolonged their existence to get better terms for themselves in the process of negotiations, demobilization and...
reconciliation. Colombia and Peru were different, marking the boundary between the transition from insurgencies of the Cold War to those of the post-Cold War era. Never part of the mainstream, and thus not supported by Cuba, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), to a lesser degree Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in Colombia, and Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru had to find alternative means to sustain their organizations. Between 1982 and 1995 they all turned to drugs trafficking as a major source of finances, and this breathed life into the movements. It allowed them to acquire weapons, recruit people and suborn government officials on unprecedented scales. One of the myths is that these insurgencies transformed into drug traffickers and lost their ideology. This is simply not true. The strategic goal of these insurgencies remained to take power through Marxist revolution, but drug trafficking did transform them. Money and the acquisition of money became elevated in importance to the detriment of political mobilization of the mass base. The money made the groups less dependent on the people for their sustenance, and viewed more as potential business rivals, so population control rather than population mobilization became pre-eminent. Also, since most of the activity of the illegal economies in the region, with some exceptions, took place in remote, depopulated or underpopulated areas of the country, the control of these empty or ‘ungoverned’ spaces became of strategic importance to the insurgent movements. These ungoverned spaces could be turned into true base areas from which strategic power could be generated. This meant that the strength of an insurgency in the post-Cold War era was often a function of government weakness and lack of will or capacity to control ungoverned spaces, rather than the ability of the insurgency to mobilize people against the government. In Latin America, political control has been traditionally maintained by controlling major centres of the population and the legal economy. Other areas could be ignored or controlled with economy of force. It was Che Guevara’s foco theory of the 1960s that first tried to take advantage of this fact by creating insurgent movements in the remote countryside where the government was not present. The idea was that the insurgent movement would become strong enough before the government could realize what was happening and concentrate enough force to destroy it. In practice this never worked because the ungoverned regions could never generate enough recruits and resources for the movement to consolidate before the government, particularly with US assistance, could react. In the post-Cold War era, the resources generated by the illegal economies made Guevara’s idea possible. Counterinsurgency then became a function of recovering empty space, filling the vacuums left by traditional methods of political and economic control that were no longer relevant in the post-Cold War world. However, post-Cold War governments were slow to realize this or develop sufficient capability to perform this task. As of this writing, many have still not. There were several reasons for this.

First, although virtually all were now democracies, institutions were weak. Providing effective services outside of major urban centres like health, education, justice or infrastructure like electricity, water and paved roads has been difficult for some countries due to a variety of factors. Another very important issue was that in general the new democratic governments mistrusted the military and deliberately kept them weak to prevent them from launching coups as in the past. In many countries militaries were constitutionally prohibited from carrying out internal defence missions. The internal defence mission was given to the police, but police forces were not sufficiently strengthened under the misguided notion that the resolution of the political tensions through democratization meant that there would be a decreased need for security overall. In some countries the result was immediate. In others it took several years. Crime in general and violent crime specifically jumped to unprecedented levels. Over the years the combination of weak police forces and huge profits from illegal markets would result in the rise of gangs and mafia organizations with insurgent-like characteristics. They armed themselves with military weapons: automatic rifles, machine guns and grenades. The more advanced groups acquired grenade launchers, light mortars,
rocket launchers, and even improvised mines. Using increasingly sophisticated irregular warfare tactics they dominated terrain, co-opted or expelled government representatives, dominated and mobilized populations, established varying degrees of a counter-state, and otherwise subverted the sovereignty of the state in the areas they came to dominate. For criminal insurgent-like groups these areas were, in many cases, urban space rather than rural areas, mostly among the unplanned slums and poor areas that ring most Latin American cities. Long neglected by security forces, they became perfect breeding grounds for the violent gangs and mafias. The groups were not insurgents in the sense that their strategic purpose was to overthrow the state, but they did seek to weaken the state so they could grow and do business. They are included here because the most successful solutions to date have, even if the governments have not used the term, employed classic counter-insurgency approaches. Remarkably, both the post-Cold War counterinsurgencies and post-Cold War anti-criminal campaigns have followed similar paths, making the same mistakes and subsequently adopting similar solutions to both the political and the criminal problems. While there are other cases, this chapter will look at four cases: Peru’s current campaign against the new generation of Sendero Luminoso, Colombia’s struggle against FARC, the struggle against the drug trafficking gangs of Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico’s ongoing struggle against the narcotrafficking mafias.

In all cases initial approaches were a combination of denial and mis-analysis. In Colombia, despite public availability of FARC strategic documents stating that their final goal was to take power, politicians and academics wasted a lot of time and effort debating over what their strategic goal really was, denying that in the post-Cold War world a Communist insurgency could seriously think about taking power. All signs that they were systematically following their publicly available strategic plan were completely ignored, except by the military. This was because the military, and to a slightly lesser degree the police, were assigned the mission to fight them. The military had a role because the fighting was fairly intense, and constantly increasing, beyond the ability of the police to confront them. However, Colombia’s government spent less of its budget on the military, which was at war, than several neighbouring Latin American governments did on their armies, which were at peace. The political establishment generally tried to avoid the war, except to criticize the security forces when they failed. As far as they were concerned, the military was only temporarily involved, dealing with a public order mission. What few wanted to recognize was that this temporary mission had been ongoing for over 30 years and showed no signs of abating. Effectiveness was measured by how many guerrillas were killed or captured compared to how many military and police were killed. Effectiveness was measured by how many guerrillas were killed or captured compared to how many military and police were killed. During the mid 1990s the numbers of killed/captured insurgents were increasing, causing some to claim that the military was winning the war, when in fact FARC was making significant organizational advances inevitably increasing the intensity of the fighting. Counter-guerrilla operations largely consisted of forays against FARC-dominated areas. These settled into a pattern of temporarily driving FARC forces out of the zone, skirmishes with FARC security rings, the capture of abandoned equipment, and subsequent withdrawal of the military from the area of operations. As a result, the bulk of FARC forces would wait out the foray in well-established alternative camps and then return to occupy their normal camps once the military had withdrawn. The guerrillas in turn would make forays against towns, attacking the police station, robbing the banks and destroying the local government centre. They would occupy the town and harangue the people until rescuing army units would drive them out. These attacks occurred very frequently and some towns were hit multiple times over the years. Although major military encounters were rare, the intensity and frequency of these encounters was systematically increasing. The military were rudely shaken in mid 1996 when FARC launched a nationwide offensive of 22 separate attacks, including overrunning an isolated company outpost at Las Delicias, Caquetá. It took an additional 18 months of a string of defeats culminating in the decimation of an understrength elite battalion at El Billar for the military to get serious about making significant changes in its approach to the war.
In Peru, the original Sendero Luminoso was largely defeated by 1994. The Peruvian police and military were able to capture most of the leadership, including Abimael Guzman, as they had foolishly concentrated in Peru’s capital city, Lima. In the countryside, Sendero units reeled in confusion. A combination of local militias known as ‘Rondas Campesinas’ and army or navy commandos hunted down and killed or captured what remained. Fighting was intense and vicious with no quarter asked or given. Sendero divided into two factions; one that remained loyal to Guzman and the other that blamed Guzman for the disaster. It is not surprising that the two groups survived in the drug trafficking zones, particularly the Upper Huallaga Valley and in the Apurimac and Ene River Valley, known by the acronym VRAE. By 2001 the counterinsurgency had been scaled back significantly, and the fight against Sendero had become essentially a counter-terrorism mission with intelligence and special forces going after individual Sendero leaders. Local security and development was de-emphasized if not discontinued in many areas. The main focus became counter-drug operations under the control of the police. It should be no surprise then that when Sendero began to make a comeback in 2006–7, there was a great deal of denial among both the government and the press that it was in fact Sendero and not drug traffickers. In fact, the terms ‘Sendero’, ‘guerrillas’ or ‘insurgency’ were not mentioned in many accounts when a string of attacks and ambushes were carried out starting in 2007. Sendero was not the same organization it had been. It had evolved, attempting to correct the mistakes that had caused its downfall in the early 1990s. Where it had tried to control population through terror, it now tried to win them over through social action. It openly allied itself with drug traffickers, and particularly the coca-growing population. However, like FARC, it maintained its Marxist ideology. The government focused on the drug trafficking aspect of the organization and denied the importance of the political. This denial caused it to dismiss the socio-political aspects of the movement and reduce combat against it to law enforcement. As a consequence, the organization grew and expanded its activities. The government got a wake-up call when Sendero Luminoso carried out a series of ambushes and attacks, inflicting between 2007 and 2009 some of the most significant losses on the Peruvian military that it had ever suffered at the hands of insurgents, including the death of 12 soldiers in a single ambush and the shooting down of a helicopter gunship (Caretas, 16 October 2008 and Caretas, 10 September 2009).

In Mexico, there had long been accommodation with drug trafficking organizations going back to the 1960s and 1970s. This accommodation varied from government to government, but over time many national, state and local officials from a variety of parties and at varying times either were suborned, made deals or ignored the drug traffickers for a variety of reasons. The problem was not considered a Mexican problem but rather a US problem. This did not mean that the Mexican police and military did not fight drugs, they did, and there were notable successes against drug kingpins and against some illegal drug crops. However, there were too many failures, and examples of impunity. Furthermore, the demand for drugs grew, both in the United States as well as in Mexico. Also, increasing effectiveness against guerrillas and drug traffickers in Colombia created opportunities for the Mexican organizations, which they gladly took up. On balance the drug trafficking organizations became more important, richer, stronger and more violent. This growth was reflected in increasing war between the cartels as rivalries came to a head. It was the savage violence between the cartels that prompted the government of Calderón to declare war on the drug trafficking organizations in 2006. However, as the war heated up, the government realized that its capability to combat the narcotraffickers was completely undermined by the long history of corruption and accommodation, particularly at the state and local level. Those that were not corrupted were in serious danger, and many police lost their lives or were too afraid to operate effectively. Furthermore, not only were state and local police forces compromised, but local society as well. Drug traffickers spent money and provided jobs. There was a degree of popular support in some areas that
Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Latin America

was difficult to eradicate. Finally, the drug traffickers were well armed and organized. They had acquired large and very sophisticated arsenals. This included fleets of armoured all-terrain vehicles, assault rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers, grenade launchers, mortars and copious amounts of ammunition. They had recruited former military and policemen that had provided training and tactical advice to the cartels. To many both inside and outside Mexico, the government had bitten off more than they could chew (Aguilar and Castañeda 2009).

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, landless poor people occupied the slopes of the many karsts that are scattered throughout the city as well as other less valuable or unoccupied land and built slums called favelas. One of the unique characteristics of these slums is that unlike many other Latin American cities, where they are concentrated on the outskirts of the cities, the favelas are scattered throughout the city occupying space next to very wealthy neighbourhoods. Furthermore, they dominate key transportation arteries. The successive governments adopted different approaches to the favela problem. In sum, law enforcement generally did not seek to establish law and order within the favelas, but rather to prevent crime from spilling from the favelas into the wealthier parts of the city. This allowed gangs to flourish and establish local dominance. Second, a succession of governors did try to improve conditions within the favelas through social programmes. However, the social programmes and security forces were never linked together, and in fact they often worked at cross purposes. Humanitarian organizations often viewed the police as the enemy. The outcome of this was that the social programmes actually strengthened the power of the gangs since NGOs and social workers could not enter the favelas without the acquiescence of the gangs. Rio society developed a taste for drugs, and the gangs became the ideal vehicle through which to satisfy that demand. This in turn brought an infusion of money into the favelas, which created violent rivalries between the gangs. Over time the weaponry and organization of these gangs became increasingly sophisticated, not only to combat each other for the domination of markets, but also to resist the police. Intergang violence and crime began to spill over into the wealthy neighbourhoods, scaring tourists, interrupting traffic and generally making life difficult for the citizens. Murders across the city spiralled out of control. The police made an increasing number of incursions into the favelas to arrest the perpetrators of the crimes. Resistance to those incursions became increasingly violent and sophisticated. The gangs acquired automatic rifles and grenades. This forced the police to wear body armour and then to acquire armoured vehicles as resistance became increasingly heavy. Videos show the vehicles being struck by Molotov cocktails and hundreds of rounds of ammunition in the space of a few minutes. The gangs escalated, acquiring increasing numbers of both general purpose and heavy machine guns as well as constructing concrete roadblocks and fighting positions to prevent police penetration of the neighbourhoods. Despite large numbers of kills and captures, the violence was only getting worse. In 2008, of a city of 11 million there were approximately 5,000 murders committed and almost 1,200 people killed by the police in shootouts. In 2009, shortly after it was announced that Rio de Janeiro had been selected for the 2016 Olympics, the gangs shot down a police helicopter, killing two of the crew.

In all of the countries, the initial denial or mis-diagnosis led to significant failures which then led to a re-evaluation of the situation whether at the national or sub-national level. Subsequently new strategies and approaches were adopted which led to increasing levels of success. All of these approaches, whether against true insurgents or insurgent-like criminal organizations, involved efforts with strategic direction at the highest political level, strengthened security or military elements, and coordinated non-military components aimed at increasing governance, social services and economic openings.

In Colombia, the first step was to change the concept of the conflict. Where the military had regarded their mission as a temporary ad hoc public order or security mission, the slogan became ‘we are at war’, meaning that the conflict became the permanent central focus of the armed forces.
Training, education, acquisition and promotion were determined by the requirements of the conflict. The enemy strategy became the central focus of a series of general officer meetings and planning focused on how to counter that strategy. This was made somewhat difficult by the Pastrana government’s policy of peace negotiations with the FARC, for which the government ceded temporary sovereignty over five rural municipalities to the guerrillas for the purpose of talks. This area was known as the demilitarized zone (DMZ). When it became apparent that peace talks in the DMZ did not mean a cessation of FARC offensive actions outside the zone, the Pastrana government gave the military the green light to proceed. The first step was to blunt FARC offensive action by creating a Rapid Deployment Force known by the acronym FUDRA. This force could be deployed anywhere in the country within 24 hours. Several bloody battles occurred between 1999 and 2002 in which every major FARC offensive was neutralized. The second step was to identify and attack all of the intermediate regional base areas from which FARC offensives were being launched in each of the then five division areas. These offensives took place between 2000 and 2001. Critical locations were recovered all over the country and new units were created, such as the High Mountain Battalions to occupy and control these former intermediate base areas.

Around the end of this phase, President Alvaro Uribe was elected, and this changed the government approach to the war. For the first time, the main objective of the government as a whole, and not just the security forces, was to establish security and governance. The government wrote a national strategy known as the Democratic Security Policy. The major objective of the strategy was to establish security for every Colombian no matter where they lived or what political party they favoured. This facilitated the implementation of the military’s third phase, which consisted of establishing local area control. When FARC had been on the offensive, a large amount of territory had been abandoned. Small military outposts and police stations had been abandoned either because they had been overrun or because they were too vulnerable to FARC offensive action. Every abandoned municipality was recovered and local forces known as ‘peasant soldiers’ and later ‘village soldiers’ were implemented. Colombia had had a bad experience with civil defence and local militia forces. All of these forces were collectively called ‘paramilitaries’. Many had degenerated into death squads or had made common cause with drug traffickers. Like the guerrillas, the paramilitaries had also gotten involved in illegal economies for financing. The Colombian solution to create necessary local defence forces was to recruit local men into the regular army, and have them serve under regular officers in their home villages. This way local forces operated under national control. To prevent these forces from being overrun by the guerrillas, each platoon was supported by a regular army platoon as well as the local police station, and mobile police forces known as carabineros. The combination of these forces plus regular forces within a few minutes call, guaranteed that no element was left in isolation. In general the combination of regional offensive and local security completely shut down the guerrillas’ ability to launch attacks against towns and military posts. In addition, it had a significant impact on both organized and common crime. All crime indicators dropped significantly due to increased security.

This in turn allowed government to function the way it was designed. Mayors and judges returned to their towns. Increased security meant that licit economic activity could return, and despite the significant costs of the security plan, economic growth took off, more than offsetting the increased military and security spending.

To insure that local government was re-establishing governance the way that it should, President Uribe established the Community Councils. Most weekends he travelled with much of the national cabinet to different areas of the country and met with the local government, military and police commanders and the populace. The meetings would last most of the day and people would talk about governance and security problems. The president would make assignments and hold local and
national officials accountable for the assignments and promises that were made. These councils boosted confidence in the government because for the first time, for many people, the national government actually cared about local conditions.

An important outcome of the establishment of security and governance was the demobilization of the paramilitaries. The atrocities of the paramilitaries had delegitimized the government as individual government representatives had tolerated or even encouraged the formation and existence of these groups. Acknowledging that they no longer had a reason to exist, the paramilitaries agreed to demobilize. While controversial and imperfect, 32,000 paramilitaries turned in weapons in exchange for reduced punishment and rehabilitation. Although marred by controversy this programme increased government legitimacy and let them focus on the guerrillas.

FARC was still essentially intact. The government had mainly filled vacuums in the portion of the country where it already had significant presence and infrastructure. FARC’s power however was generated from ungoverned space. They had established significant base areas from which they projected strategic power against the rest of the country. In order to strategically defeat the insurgency, the government had to eliminate these base areas. In 2003 the military launched Operation Libertad I, the first phase of the national plan known as Plan Patriota. FARC’s strategy contemplated a siege of Bogota from base areas centred in the eastern cordillera surrounding the capital. It was vital to eliminate this base area to remove this threat. Around 10,000 army troops spread out into the areas dominated by FARC. For the first six months they pushed patrols deep into guerrilla territory seeking to systematically cut off logistics and communications routes. FARC, misreading the operation’s intent, moved to more remote ground, thinking that after a few weeks the soldiers would leave. However, they did not. Furthermore the army took measures to win over the civilian population. Cut off and surrounded, the guerrillas soon began to suffer desertions. This allowed the development of intelligence which was used by army special forces to carry out strikes and ambushes. In the last three months of the operation most of the operational level FARC commanders were killed. A captured FARC after action analysis revealed that every guerrilla front in the area of operations lost between 50 per cent and 90 per cent of their forces to the point where FARC high command ordered these fronts out of the area to prevent their annihilation.

The next phase of the plan, Operation JM, was implemented in 2004. The Colombian military created Joint Task Force Omega composed of 18,000 mostly army, but also important air force and navy riverine components. The main role of the United States was to provide logistics, communications, intelligence and maintenance support to sustain this force in the field. This force was launched deep into the Colombian jungle against the main FARC base area in Caquetá and Meta departments. FARC’s plan to resist this advance consisted of attrition operations, particularly with mines and indirect fire, while attempting to manoeuvre and draw a military unit into a kill zone where they could inflict an important tactical and psychological defeat. While the army did suffer combat casualties the main enemy was disease, particularly leishmaniasis. The advance was heavily harassed by copious amounts of mortar bombs either rigged as mines or fired from tubes. The mortar tubes and bombs were made in jungle factories. This diminished considerably when the army captured the shops where the mortars were made. No large battles took place, but the guerrillas suffered steady attrition from combat, disease and desertion. Furthermore, huge amounts of guerrilla infrastructure and logistics were captured and destroyed. Finally, the operation fragmented guerrilla forces that were only able to communicate with each other remotely. This set up the organization for penetration and deception. Another significant benefit of government domination of formerly ungoverned space was a great reduction in drug cultivation and trafficking.

Like other areas, once security was established the efforts at consolidating governance began. However, because these areas were remote, and dependent in most cases on illegal economies, a special effort needed to be made to bring governance to these zones. It was decided to create a
special coordinating body known as the Centre for the Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI). The director of this organization had a direct line to the president. The CCAI was not a new agency, but rather a committee to coordinate and prioritize the efforts of existing government ministries. Their job was to work together with each other and the local communities to identify the needs and programmes to be implemented. Supported by the United States the initial efforts were modest but increased in importance, coverage and size over time.

By 2008, FARC forces had been reduced to relatively isolated pockets in a number of very geographically difficult zones around the country. This allowed the government to carry out a number of attacks on medium- and high-level leadership targets. In March 2008, the military, in Operation Fenix, attacked and killed Raul Reyes, a member of the ruling FARC seven-man Secretariat. Another member of the Secretariat, Ivan Rios, was killed by his own bodyguard when military pressure on his unit caused him to become paranoid and threaten those closest to him. Finally, Manuel Marulanda, long time leader of FARC, died of old age in the jungle. In June 2008 the military was able to launch Operation Jaque and rescue 15 political hostages from under the noses of the FARC, including three Americans that had been kidnapped in 2003. In September 2010, the Colombian military launched Operation Sodoma, in which they killed FARC military strategist, Jorge Briceno, aka ‘Mono Jojoy’.

However, FARC did not collapse. The three members of the Secretariat killed in 2008 were replaced and a new leader, Alfonso Cano, was appointed who reaffirmed FARC’s commitment to the strategic plan. FARC began to operate in increasingly irregular and dispersed forms through the use of expendable militias and massive use of remotely detonated mines and explosives. In addition, remnants of the paramilitaries that either decided not to demobilize, remobilized or formed new groups occupied space not consolidated by the government, in some cases replacing guerrilla forces. However, unlike the previous paramilitaries they are almost wholly dedicated to illicit economies and are not tied to the government or military. Today they are called criminal bands or BACRIM. So while insurgents and irregular threats are on the defensive in Colombia, they have not been defeated. This is due primarily to two factors: enormous profits and continuing ungoverned space where they can function. Second, FARC has found sanctuary and support in neighbouring countries. Raul Reyes was killed just across the border in Ecuador, and evidence was found of complicity between FARC and individuals of the Ecuadorian government. Not only were Ecuadorians involved, but also individuals and organizations from the radical left from nearly every country in the hemisphere as well as Spain and others. Venezuela and the Chávez government played a particularly important role to the degree that the Colombian government officially complained to the Organization of American States (OAS) in August 2010 and presented a long list of evidence of Venezuelan complicity. So while it is clear that the Colombian government, particularly under President Uribe, made great strides towards achieving a counterinsurgency victory, the final consolidation of that victory due to drug trafficking and international collusion may take many more years of effort.

Efforts in the other countries are much less advanced than in Colombia. In Peru, the government came to the conclusion that in the VRAE it had to defeat both drug trafficking and the guerrillas. In order to do this it had to attack the reasons that people participated in these activities, which were largely social and economic. They developed Plan VRAE, an inter-agency effort to reduce poverty, by increasing access to health care, education and legal economic opportunities combined with a significant security effort. The policy strengthened police counter-narcotics activities and military counter-terrorist operations (Government of Peru 2009). While news from the VRAE is scarce, levels of violence fell in 2010 and important guerrilla leaders were killed or captured. However, Sendero expanded its efforts in Lima making it unclear whether the advances have been due to Plan VRAE or whether the organization had adapted.
In Mexico, the president launched a war against narcotrafficking in December 2006. This plan has multiple lines of operation. First, Mexican police and justice were deemed insufficient to combat the drug trafficking organizations. In particular local and state police forces were ill trained and riddled with corruption. A national level process to reform and retrain police forces and overhaul the justice system was initiated. Meanwhile, federal police forces were duplicated and committed to the effort. Because this process was going to be long and difficult, the military was ordered into the gap. The military had a cleaner image and was considered less corrupt than the police. Troops were deployed, largely to the northern border states where the violence was the worst. The military is supposed to hand the mission back to the police gradually as the police and justice reforms are completed. Other lines of operation included the development of a dedicated intelligence organization, reducing funding through the control of money laundering, developing a national information campaign and reducing weapons trafficking, particularly from the United States. While it is clear that many weapons in the hands of the traffickers were originally manufactured in the United States, a majority of these are military weapons not available on the civilian market. An examination of the numbers suggests that no more than 17 per cent of the weapons come from the civilian market of the United States (La Jeunesse and Lott 2009). However, what is likely is that a great deal of military grade ammunition does cross the border as it is openly available on the US market. Between 2006 and 2010, 45,000 troops and 5,000 federal police were deployed to 18 states. Meanwhile over 28,000 people were killed. While the military have scored some notable successes, as of this writing, they were still in a steep learning curve. Also, untrained for irregular war, human rights complaints jumped from 182 in 2006 to 1,230 in 2008. Furthermore, levels of violence were only reduced by 5 per cent. Interviews with military sources indicate that the drug traffickers have developed the capability of carrying out sophisticated ambushes and even manoeuvre warfare attempting to isolate and overrun platoon size military units by drawing them into kill zones, setting up blocking forces to prevent reinforcements and then annihilating the unit through the combination of support weapons and manoeuvre (Mexican officers 2009–10).

In 2010 President Calderón announced a social component to the strategy consisting of increasing health care, education and promoting small and medium business. This was due to the realization that many young people were joining the cartels for as little as 45 dollars a week because there were no alternative opportunities. Also, cartel leaders were winning the loyalty of locals by providing services that the government had failed to provide. The steady supply of recruits and view that the cartels could get things done where the government could not undermined the ability of the government to fight them. This programme is too new to have generated results but the unmistakable parallels to the classic counterinsurgency approach are not lost on the informed observer.

Similar approaches have been adopted in Rio de Janeiro. In late 2008 the military police fought a particularly fierce battle to kill, capture or expel drug traffickers from favela Santa Marta. This culminated in December. However, instead of leaving the favela as in the past, the police stayed. They established a permanent base inside the favela and created a new ‘community police’ unit. The community police operated much like US provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in Iraq or Afghanistan. They worked with local community leaders to provide security but also identified local needs and brought in development projects. This included improved housing, day care, vocational training and education. Crime dropped dramatically, prosperity and governance went up. Since then, the programme has been gradually extended to other favelas in Rio. Regular and special units first went in and battled with the drug traffickers, occupying the neighbourhood. Once recovered, a community police unit was established. The units were given the official name of Permanent Police Units (UPPs). While as of this writing there were eight units, the plan is to have 60,000 new police in UPPs by 2016. Where the UPP units have been located, crime has dropped by as much as 85 per cent according to official statistics.
In conclusion, the application of counterinsurgency principles in Latin America has been found to be useful against a whole range of irregular threats, not just classic political insurgency, although it is too early to tell what the final results will be in places like Peru, Mexico and Rio de Janeiro. Like insurgency, the violent criminal organizations and gangs subvert governance, use irregular tactics, dominate terrain and have roots in social and economic grievances. The strategic whole-of-government approach to counterinsurgency, which seeks to repress violent behaviour challenging the sovereignty of the state, but simultaneously deal with the source of social grievances from gaps resulting from obsolete and dysfunctional societal organization and economy, effectively strengthens democratic governance.

References

Interviews with Mexican military officers during 2009 and 2010 who prefer to remain anonymous.