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Gangs in Honduras and Containment Policy

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Abstract

This paper outlines a plausible mechanism whereby the country of Honduras could curtail gang violence within its borders with the eventual intent of exterminating gangs in Honduras. First, the need for such a plan is presented, with current statistics on the violence in Honduras. The paper then explores the possible use of an adapted form of Cold War containment policy against Honduran gangs. This method of containment would work by hindering the activities of the gangs and more importantly by addressing the societal factors that contribute to gang proliferation. It would contain gangs ideologically, economically, and socially, inhibiting their growth by stifling their economy and their supply of new members. This paper reviews anti-gang strategies that have proved ineffective and the reasons for their ineffectiveness. After it explicates the nature of the two main gangs in Honduras, it discusses containment and its history, and how Cold War containment policy could be applied in Honduras. The method, location, and responsibilities of the involved parties are described. Concerns relating to the adaptability of containment are also addressed. Lastly, this paper briefly discusses the current situation in Honduras's political relationship with the United States.

Keywords: Gangs, Honduras, Containment Policy, Gang Violence

According to the World Bank's most recent data, the homicide rate in Honduras, a presidential republic in the center of Central America, was 56.52 per 100,000 people in 2016 (*International Homicides*). The National Violence Observatory, reports an even higher rate at 59.00 homicides per 100,000 people (Honduras 2018 Crime & Safety Report, 13). With regard to homicide, Honduras is the second most dangerous country

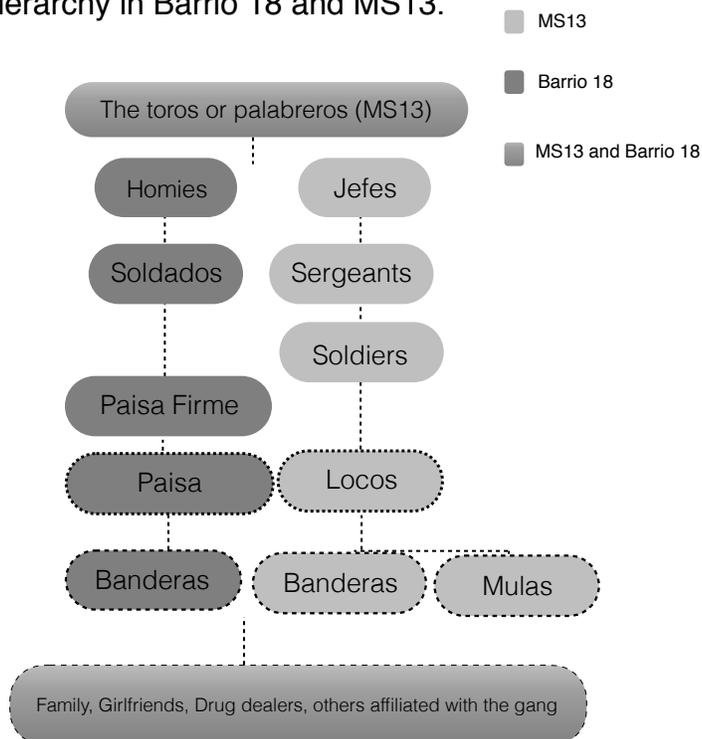
in the world, outranked only by El Salvador. The majority of this violence is related to gang activity. The two most predominant gangs in Honduras are Mara Salvatrucha, more often referred to as MS13, and Barrio 18 or 18th Street Gang. The violence of these gangs has ravaged the country since the 1990s. This has contributed to decreased tourism and decreased travel within the country, and increased poverty and violence (Gangs in Honduras 1, 3). Pervasive government corruption has only aided the expansion of gangs (Ratcliffe et al., 112, Wason). In light of these facts, one is driven to ask, "What can be done about this?" One possible solution would be for the Honduran government and the Honduran people to adopt some of the principles of containment policy. Containment was a strategy used by the United States against the USSR during the Cold War. George Kennan, a United States diplomat to Russia, is the generally accepted father of containment. He not only understood the USSR, but he also understood Russian culture, having studied the writings of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. He based much of his original ideas of containment on insight he gained from this study ("A Conversation with Kennan's Biographer"). While this strategy was originally used by one sovereign nation against another, some components of it can be applied by the Honduran Government and people, against gangs in Honduras with the eventual intent of extinguishing gangs.

1. Gangs in Honduras

Although there are many gangs active in Honduras, the two predominant gangs are MS13 and Barrio 18. While both are dependent on extorting the transportation system by demanding payments from bus and taxi drivers, Barrio18 heavily extorts its local territory as well, demanding payment from pulperia (small, family-owned, corner

stores) owners, hardware store owners, and other business owners. This is known as micro-extortion (Gangs in Honduras, 20). Besides extortion of the transportation system, local drug sales are a major source of income for MS13. Both gangs are organized in a loose vertical hierarchy. However, this structure is somewhat more horizontal in Barrio 18 than in MS13. The highest leader, the “toro,” is oftentimes incarcerated. He manages the gang’s activity and communicates with other gang leaders, sometimes in other countries (Gangs in Honduras, 16). This may include deciding which colonias (neighborhoods) would be advantageous for the gang to control or which drug wholesaler to buy from. Under him are the “homies” or “jefes,” which are over the gang members and operations in a specific area. Each sub-group is called a “clica.” After the jefe comes the soldados and then the paisas firmes. A paisa firme is the last official member of the gang. He is in charge of the unofficial members of the gang, the banderas. Banderas are, often forcibly recruited, boys usually 6-14 years old. They are look-outs, extortion collectors, and errand runners for the gangs (Gangs in Honduras, 17). Family members and girlfriends are sometimes involved with the gang as well. They might stash drugs or firearms or make drug runs for the gang (Gangs in Honduras, 18). This hierarchy is typical of Barrio 18, however, MS13 also functions on a similar structure. See diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Gang hierarchy in Barrio 18 and MS13.



MS13 is more tightly structured than Barrio 18. This is due to the revenue of the gang. MS13 draws much of its revenue from drug vending and extortion of the transportation system. This is referred to as macro-extortion. The gang does not extort the local neighborhood; this affords it a much better reputation with the local community (Gangs in Honduras, 31). Both gangs rely on banderas for information, warnings, and small jobs (Gangs in Honduras, 29). There is some evidence that MS13 in Honduras may be working in close connection with MS13 in El Salvador. This would indicate that MS13 is much more sophisticated than Barrio 18 (Gangs in Honduras, 28). Another difference between MS13 and Barrio 18 is MS13's more selective use of violence. At times MS13 acts as the protector of the people against rival gangs. Members of MS13 also do not resist the authorities if they are caught (Gangs in Honduras, 35).

Gangs are fiercely territorial. Their territory is usually divided by colonia or neighborhood. New territory is conquered colonia by colonia (Gangs in Honduras, 12). When one gang claims a colonia, it will often either displace or kill all persons connected with other gangs. On one occasion, after MS13 had recently taken a colonia from Barrio 18, they killed an older street vendor who had once been part of Barrio 18. The vendor was disabled mentally and physically after having been beaten by and thrown out of Barrio 18 in his youth. He posed no threat to MS13, yet they killed him anyway (Gangs in Honduras, 36). His murder illustrates the deep territoriality of these gangs. InSight Crime's report states that "the most important operational aspect of the Barrio 18 is controlling territory" (Gangs in Honduras, 19). Territory is vital for many reasons. It is a major source of revenue, prestige, and power. It is necessary for storage of weapons and drugs, and for the safe lodging of the gang's members.

2. Previously Used Anti-Gang Strategies

Many previous strategies have been employed against the gangs unsuccessfully. Among the most notable is Mano Dura, which is also known as Zero Tolerance policy. Mano Dura law began in 2003. During this time the police arrested many suspected gang members. In an essay on this policy, Lirio Rivera wrote, "Zero tolerance demonstrated poor results; not only did it fail to reduce crime and delinquency, but also it was unable to control or disband the youth gangs" (Gutiérrez Rivera, 492). Incarcerating gang members, it was thought, would reduce the territoriality of the gangs. This, however, may have produced quite the opposite effect. Rivera continues to write, "Zero-tolerance policies reinforced gang territoriality and the gang community" (492). This strategy has clearly been ineffective. Part of this may be due to the underlying

cultural value of indirect correction. In Honduran culture, direct confrontation is not effective. Since, gangs are a cultural issue, not just a legal problem, disregarding the culture in which they proliferate is strategic suicide.

Another strategy that has not yet demonstrated significant success is Intelligence-Led Policing. Intelligence-Led Policing (ILP) focuses on gathering intelligence and using that data to influence police decision makers, thereby making policing more informed and effective (Ratcliffe et al., 114). Due to the high turnover rate in the upper police levels, this strategy would be very difficult to implement in Honduras successfully. The authors Ratcliffe et al. write, "The fragmented nature of the HNP and the rapid turnover of leadership is a clear impediment to an analyst tasked with influencing decision-makers" (114). The analyst plays a vital role in ILP. This would take the intelligence out of Intelligence-led Policing, undercutting the whole system. The police, however, are not the only source of corruption. Corruption is rampant in the government. Ana Quintana, a senior policy analyst for the Heritage Foundation writes that "Corruption continues undermining Honduras' ability to effectively act in its own national interests" (Quintana). This is a serious drawback to the success of ILP. While this system is inadequate on its own, it could potentially be used in conjunction with another strategy, specifically one that targeted government corruption.

The Honduran government and people have experienced many failed anti-gang policies, but what would work? Although no idea, strategy, or plan is perfect, an adapted policy of containment is a plausible, potent path to gang extinction.

3. Containment in the Cold War

But now, what is containment and how did it work? George F. Kennan is generally considered the author of containment. Kennan served as a United States diplomat in Russia during and after World War II. He outlined the basic idea of containment in 1946 in his “Long Telegram” from Moscow to the government of the United States. This eight thousand word cable became the foundation of the United States containment policy (*The Cold War*, 29). He followed this up with the article “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” about a year later under the pseudonym Mr. X (Sempa, 179). Although, the long telegram was foundational to containment it was not its sole parent. John Iatrides wrote in *George F. Kennan and the Birth of Containment The Greek Test Case* that “If the ‘long telegram’ did not actually give birth to the strategy of containment, it was nevertheless very important” (129). Iatrides wrote that “the ‘long telegram’ arrived at the perfect moment to encapsulate and bolster the views of key officials who had reached similar conclusions on their own” (129). So it would seem that some of the ideas of containment were circulating in the minds of some officials in Washington, but it was Kennan who first, best, and most completely articulated the idea of containment.

Essentially, this strategy aimed at restricting the expansion of communism ideologically and physically. During the first stages, the United States economically boosted countries that were in danger of falling to communism either through the inward rise of a Communist party or through the outward threat of invasion by the USSR (*The Cold War*, 31). The United States also posted troops in the vicinity of these countries to discourage the USSR from invading them. This was known as the Marshall Plan (“A

Conversation with Kennan's Biographer"). The latter stages were very different as many presidents edited containment to fit their desires. Throughout the duration of the Cold War, each President modified containment to his liking. The Eisenhower administration sought a more offensive approach, with the aim of "rolling back" the Soviet Union. This, however, proved too risky and so the administration resigned itself to containment in some regions (Sempa, 182). The Nixon administration followed Kennan's original idea of containment more closely than perhaps any other administration (Sempa, 182). At times, when the President relied strongly on his advisers, containment policy was a mishmash of multiple conflicting ideas. This occurred during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, leading many to comment that Carter had simply "stapled the drafts" of his disagreeing advisors together (*Strategies of Containment*, 347). When Reagan became President, containment took a more constricting turn. In *Strategies of Containment*, Gaddis wrote that Reagan sought the best way to use containment to achieve Kennan's original intent, "To increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate" (353). This version of containment was possibly the most effective. Reagan exploited the weaknesses of the Soviet Union economically and ideologically.

4. Containment in Honduras

Unsurprisingly, containment policy cannot be simply picked up and plopped down onto the gang situation in Honduras. The factors, players, and consequences of each situation are vastly different. Containment was a strategy to be employed by one superpower state against another superpower state. It was tailored to slowly kill a state whose goals threatened the security of the Western world. The situation in Honduras is not state-against-state. Gangs are not a sovereign state; rather they are a violent anti-

state organization. The differences in the situation are readily apparent. So, how could containment be in any way applicable? To see this, it is helpful to remember that containment was a strategy fashioned to 1. avoid all-out war with the USSR because the United States could not afford that, and 2. to end the communist threat to the Western world. The goals of a strategy against gangs in Honduras would be 1. to avoid all-out war, which it is doubtful the government would or could accomplish, and 2. to extinguish the gangs in Honduras. As the style of a tailored suit may be becoming on several deferent people, perhaps in a different sizes or colors, so an altered containment strategy could be soluble to the Honduran gang situation. The goals, that Cold War containment was designed to achieve, are, in principle, the same goals that an altered containment strategy would seek to fulfill in Honduras. The major gangs are organized and coherent enough that some principles of containment are applicable. In his book *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, Gaddis affirms that containment is a transferable approach. He writes "Great grand strategies are bounded by time and space, but they also transcend time and space. [...] the adjective 'great' implies relevance beyond context. It suggests that the strategy in question can serve as a guide in periods, places, and circumstances yet to come" (380). The most transferable aspects of containment to the Honduran setting would be economic boosting in at-risk areas, more comprehensive police training, legislature changes, and cultural awareness. George Kennan understood the importance of cultural awareness when inventing a strategy. Before he devised containment, he sought to understand Russian culture ("A Conversation with Kennan's Biographer"). Kennan accomplished this by studying Russian literature. He

learned that patience was a key virtue in Russian culture and incorporated this into containment (“A Conversation with Kennan’s Biographer”).

The Government’s role in Containment

To apply these principles of containment in Honduras, one must have a method and a location in which to start. In a designated location, the government and the people must begin to reverse the circumstances that promote and enable gangs to thrive in Honduras. Due to limited resources, capabilities, and the risk of all-out war with the gangs, most of this strategy would start small in one colonia in one city. The first colonias in which containment would be enacted should most likely be areas that are at-risk to falling under gang control. Within these areas, the government would work to build up the confidence of the people in itself. Then, it would increase policing in the area. In areas that are very poor, the government would encourage business and entrepreneurship mainly by providing security. This security would aim at making extortion nearly impossible, thus, cutting revenue to gangs, while increasing the prosperity of the local economy. This plan is not an immediate fix. Rather, it is an agenda that hopes to slowly constrict the gangs until they collapse. This plan has no fixed time table but will expand based on resources and capabilities. These local government initiatives would contain gang activity and economy.

While much of containment would occur on a local level, this strategy would also include several national tactics. These national objectives would subtly attack some of the societal factors that promote gang proliferation. First, the government would consistently work toward eliminating corruption, thus promoting trust. Second, and hand in hand with the first objective, would be training the police force ethically and tactically

as both areas are pitifully lacking. Authors Jerry Ratcliffe, Evan Sorg, and James Rose describe the Honduran police force as “fragmented, antiquated and disorganized.” They add that “Police corruption in the country has been described as ‘endemic’” (Jerry H. Ratcliffe, Evan T. Sorg, James W. Rose, 112). Third, the tax on marriage would be abolished and instead the tax on alcohol and tobacco would be raised. A small tax cut could be offered for married couples in the first year of marriage. Instead of penalizing marriage it would be incentivized. This would promote more healthy families and thus reduce the number of virtually fatherless children, making them less susceptible to gang recruitment and impressment. This set of objectives would contain gangs ideologically, and socially.

The Citizens' Role in Containment

The citizen's responsibility in containment would focus on preventing children from being used by or entering the gangs. This would be the work of families and churches. They would work to identify children at risk for being drawn into gangs and provide for their needs whether those are emotional or physical. This could mean churches coming together to provide homes and necessities for high—risk children. By protecting children from being used as banderas, the Honduran people would effectively short-out the warning system of the gangs, as well as much of their errand running and extortion collecting system. In order to fill the positions left vacant, the gangs would have to use more of their higher ranking members to do routine errands. This would contain the growth and efficiency of gangs. The amended version of containment that could be utilized in Honduras would be a slowly constricting method that would indirectly attack the weak points of gangs.

Location

One location that would be a prime place to initiate a containment strategy would be the city of Comayagua (circled in red below). It is centrally located, has strong tourism potential, and is not overrun by gangs. In the center of the Spanish colonial city stands one of the oldest cathedrals in Central America, with one of the oldest clocks and one of the oldest pipe organs in Central America. It is also home to a Honduran military base, Soto Cano Air Base, which hosts United States military. Although this city is relatively safe, gang violence is still present. These factors make it an excellent location to begin containment.

Map 1. Map of Honduras (“Map of Honduras”)



Limitations

As with any plan, this one has its limitations. One may ask, “How can one be sure this will work?” The answer is, one cannot know for certain that this constricting containment will work. One can never know if a strategy will work until it has been attempted. However, one can have reasonable, historical assurance of the feasibility of an idea. And this is present concerning containment. It was effective in the Cold War,

and has been lauded as a “great grand strategy.” It has lived up to this title. Gaddis wrote, “By the end of the Cold war, the successes of containment had clearly outweighed its failures. There was no war with the Soviet Union, [...] and no appeasement either” (*Strategies of Containment*, 381). Gaddis then rightly applauds containment saying, “It is difficult to imagine *any* peacetime grand strategy in which the results produced in the end corresponded more closely with the objectives specified at the beginning” (381). But, one may ask, will it apply to the situation in Honduras? Gaddis discusses the transferability of containment in *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, writing, “Leaders will be applying its lessons in periods, places, and circumstances that nobody can now foresee” (381). Clearly, Kennan believed that containment was a transferable concept. This strategy is especially transferable because it considers the cultural particularities of the area in which it is implemented. In Honduras, indirect correction is a cultural value, subconsciously used in everyday interactions, whether at home, work, school, or church. Fittingly, containment indirectly constricts gangs. Thus, Honduran people will be more understanding and more supportive of this less culturally offensive strategy, than they have been with previous strategies.

5. Conclusion

Some components of containment policy can be applied by the Honduran Government and people against gangs in Honduras with the eventual intent of extinguishing gangs. This strategy of containment would constrict Honduran gangs’ ideology, economy, expansion, movement, and efficiency. Not only is a solution to the issue of gangs vital to the development of Honduras but, it also benefits the United

States. By extinguishing gang violence in Honduras, many people will not have the desperate need to immigrate illegally. Illegal immigration-related issues are frequent headlines in United States news, reflecting that this is a major American societal issue. Implementing an adapted containment policy will benefit all of the countries involved. Honduras will not lose its people to violence and emigration. And so, it will continue to develop culturally and economically. Implementing containment now could be especially profitable for Honduras. With headlines banner the Northern Triangle's loss of United States foreign aid and the potential future closure of the United States-Mexico border, the political pressure on Honduras to take more positive action to treat its grievous socio-economic maladies is rapidly increasing. Adopting a containment strategy now could be exactly the right step for the Honduran government to take, in order to show its people and the United States that it will initiate effective measures to end gang violence and promote economic growth. While there has been much backlash over Trump's decision to end aid to the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), W.J. Hennigan writes for Time "President Donald Trump stumbled into a hard truth of international migration this week: No amount of foreign aid is going to stop the exodus of undocumented migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to the United States as long as those Central American countries remain impoverished, dangerous and unstable" (Hennigan). Until the Honduran government takes a more definitive initiative in actively solving its national issues, it is unlikely it will receive any significant foreign aid. An altered containment strategy could be a much more efficacious method to end gang violence than any strategy yet employed in Honduras.

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