CARGO THEFT IN THE TRANSPORTATION SECTOR:

A Comparative Analysis of Texas and Mexico

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Abstract

This technical report compares trucking cargo theft in the Texas and Mexico and finds fundamentally di□erent organized crime groups (OCGs) and modus operandi at work in each entity. Mexican trucking cargo theft is fundamentally more violent and overt, whereas theft in Texas tends to be less violent and is shifting to fraud/deception mixed with cyber elements to enhance digital fraud; described as strategic theft with elements of FBI defined cyber theft. Mexican OCGs engage truck cargo theft as part of diversification of criminal activities trend. Weak state capacity in Mexico helps to explain the key di□erences in these criminal markets despite their parasitic feeding on a highly integrated binational transportation sector. The role of private security firms is discussed, and policy prescriptions are provided.

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Introduction

This technical report explores the threats posed by cargo theft to the transportation sector in the United States and Mexico with an emphasis on its impact on Texas. In the post North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (1994) trade environment, economists view the United States, Mexico, and Canada, as a single integrated market, especially in industries like the automotive market. While NAFTA has been replaced by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in July 1, 2020, the fact of high levels of integration between the two nations and Canada remains.[1] We would thus expect cross-border dark networks to operate—piggy-backing on licit trade with illicit wares in areas of weak state capacity to parasitically steal from this market. [2] Mexico has become the United States' largest trading partner and largest purchaser of US goods.[3] Following the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, many companies pivoted to the Mexican market in an e□ort to "nearshore" or "friend" shore away from East Asia.[4] This only increased integration which is as of 2024 over $935 billion in bilaterial annual trade.[5]

While Mexican cartels and organized crime groups (OCGs) conduct trucking/cargo theft in the United States, it is limited. This report finds that in Mexico and Texas there are fundamentally distinct groups targeting trucking for theft operating under di□erent *modus operandi*. In the United States, and in particular South Texas, trucking theft crews focus increasingly on what analysts call "strategic theft." These organized crime rings use digital forgery and forged documents to steal trucking cargo nonviolently through deception in a combination of the what the FBI defines as "strategic cargo theft" (by deception/fraud) and "cyber cargo theft" where cyber attacks are used to garner information to manipulate "fictitious pick-ups."[6] As this trend continues, this will become the top cargo theft methodology.

In Mexico the theft is more predatory and violent. There the theft crews which are increasingly directly controlled by large, organized crime groups (OCGs), colloquially known as cartels, violently hijack cargo.[7] This key di□erence is based on stronger law enforcement and rule of law operations in the United States which deter violent crimes through a focus on investigative resources on violent crimes but deemphasize nonviolent and di□icult to quantify property crime. Due to the emphasis in the United States on targeting and deterring violent crime (for good reason), property crimes receive fewer investigative resources, allowing groups which specialize in electronically forging documents to thrive.[8]

The primary impact of the security issues identified here on Texastransportation security is thus economic. Cargo theft in the United States is a drain and an increased cost distributed throughout the economic system. Consumers pay higher prices and higher insurance

rates. Trucking companies take losses as do buyers and sellers. These costs are all passed on to consumers at all stages of the value chain. Theft in Mexico also increases costs for products shipped from Mexico into the United States and in particular, border states like Texas, which are more exposed to trade with Mexico. As far as crime capitalizes larger groups, undeterred crimes in one sector rapidly capitalize crime in another such as drugs or oil theft. [9] Further, this crime hinders foreign direct investment in Mexico as Shannon O'Neil of the Council on Foreign relations argues.[10]

Cargo theft in Mexico and the United States and Texas specifically play a key role in understanding the economic drags on bilateral trade and speak directly to issues of critical infrastructure protection in the transportation sector. Highlighting this, the new *National Security Strategy* from the Trump Administration in 2025 emphasizes the importance of protecting American critical infrastructure, fighting transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) which the administration has designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), and promoting the economic strength of the United States.[11] Stressing the importance of the Western Hemisphere within which Mexico is the closest neighbor, the national security strategy for 2025 advances the "Trump Corollary of the Monroe Doctrine," which describes enforcing the previously neglected Monroe Doctrine and keeping foreign powers out of the Western Hemisphere.[12]

Relevantly, Mexican organized crime groups have been known to receive fentanyl precursors and money laundering services from organized crime actors based in China, further illustrating how these organizations which engage in cargo theft may also be linked to foreign powers; though indirectly.[13] Tow it the 2025 National Security Strategy argues:

> American policy should focus on enlisting regional champions that can help create tolerable stability in the region, even beyond those partners' borders. These nations would help us stop illegal and destabilizing migration, neutralize cartels, nearshore manufacturing, and develop local private economies, among other things.[14]

Thus, we see that cargo theft which damages US-Mexico supply chains and often in Mexico involves "cartels" which the US government has designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are not just homeland, but national security concerns.[15]

Literature Review

Cargo theft can be traced back to the earliest days of American history as it includes the theft of any good or service being shipped.[16] Nonetheless, it is largely understudied and there is a dearth of research on cargo theft as Burns and Crawford argue. Some scholars

even refer to it as a "silent crime."[17] This is because it often goes unreported and businesses simply absorb the cost through insurance or by accepting the loss.[18]

Following the 9/11 attacks, Congress feared the potential overlap of cargo theft and terrorism and mandated better reporting of the crime to the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) which first published cargo theft data in 2013, though it has progressively improved since. [19] Nonetheless, inconsistencies in reporting make data collection a continuing issue. Burns and Crawford (2025) thus argue that cargo theft policing is largely "crime control theater" defined as largely symbolic acts.[20] Coughlin argues that there are few good estimates on the business losses of resulting from cargo theft due to bureaucratic and reporting hurdles and unsynchronized state cargo theft laws, etc.[21] Thus, cargo theft estimates in the billions of dollars in losses are as accepted yet problematic as the assumption that 85% of all critical infrastructure is in private sector hands is in the homeland security realm.[22]

Defining Cargo Theft

Before we can continue this discussion and comparative analysis of cargo theft in the United States and Mexico, we must first define cargo theft. The FBI defines cargo theft as:

> Cargo theft includes—but is not limited to—theft of goods, chattel, money, or baggage that constitutes, in whole or in part, a commercial freight shipment moving in commerce. Theft can occur from, but not limited to, the following: Methods of transportation: pipeline system, railroad car, motor truck, tank, vessel, aircraft, other vehicles. Locations: storage facility, station house, platform, depot, wharf, airport, air navigation facility, container freight station, warehouse, freight distribution facility, freight consolidation facility. Containers: intermodal container, intermodal chassis, trailer.[23]

For the purposes of this discussion, this report will focus on trucking cargo theft as the primary modality.

Organized Crime and Cargo Theft in Mexico

Security scholars have pointed to the dramatic impact on Mexico rising truck hijackings could have on the Mexican economy positing it may be an existential security threat for the Mexican economy.[24] Sledge puts this into the historical context of banditry in Mexico which Sullivan described as "social banditry" citing the concept of Eric Hobsbawm a 20th century Marxist historian.[25] In this sense, cartels seek to portray themselves as Robin Hoods to gain legitimacy and support from the local populations they seek to control.[26] This enables a broader trend within Mexican drug tra□icking, as these large groups have sought to diversify their activities beyond drug tra□icking, such that the terms organized crime groups (OCGs) or illicit networks are more apt.[27] Some of the activities these groups moved into

are extortion, control of the avocado market,[28] *huachicol* or oil theft mafias,[29] *aguachicol* (water theft mafias), etc.[30] The latest iteration of the diversification in Mexican organized crime is cargo theft, focusing on trucking. Truck cargo theft concentrates around Mexico City and its network of highways that also flow northward to the US-Mexico border. These central states include Estado de Mexico and Puebla, which are the top two states for cargo theft in Mexico. [31]

Mexico has a complex organized crime landscape due to weak state capacity. [32] Nonetheless, the two largest cartels are the Sinaloa Cartel and the Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG). [33] In 2024 the Sinaloa Cartel went into civil war and has e□ectively split between the Chapitos faction and the Mayiza faction.[34] The CJNG has been the largest beneficiary of this split given the Chapitos have formed an alliance with it and it is now the undisputed largest cartel in Mexico.[35] The Mayiza faction has proven resilient, geographically widespread, [36] and is according to scholars such as Krame et al. (2025) known for less violence and fentanyl tra□icking.[37] In that sense both the US and Mexican governments may be incentivized to target its rivals, the CJNG and the Sinaloa cartel given their pioneering roles in the fentanyl epidemic and their respective penchants for violence.[38] Indeed, the February 22, 2026 strike in Tapalpa in which Mexican government forces killed Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes "El Mencho" may be an example of this emphasis on the CJNG.[39]

There is a debate between security experts on the level of involvement of large cartels in trucking theft. Luis Villatoro of *Overhaul* views truck theft crews as smaller independent specialists distinct from cartels.[40] Others such as Borderland Beat reporters who use pseudonyms for protection, including *Redlogarthym*, argue these crews may be proxies for larger cartels.[41]

Impact on the Mexican Economy

According to Bloomberg reporting by Amy Stillman citing an AI27 study, cargo theft raises Mexican grocery prices by 7.6% demonstrating the impact upon the Mexican economy. [42] As Nathaniel Parish Flannery writing for *the Hustle* describes, Mexico has been a major winner in the near shoring boom since the pandemic with US importing $500 billion worth of goods and services in 2023 alone according to the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, the number of trucks passing between the United States and Mexico increased from "5.7m in 2019 to 7.4m in 2023," and in the first quarter of 2023 foreign direct investment (FDI) in Mexico hit $20 billion. [43] Recent data for 2024 suggest the total bilateral trade between the United States and Mexico is now $935.1 billion making Mexico the United States's largest trading partner.[44]

Private Security Firms in Mexico

Increasingly, Mexico has seen the rise of a private security firm complex generally and specifically focused on trucking cargo theft in Mexico. Some are US based firms such as *Overhaul* which also provide strategic level intelligence reports on Mexico.[45] But they are far from the only firm addressing these issues for their clients in Mexico. Other firms include *AI27,* which uses artificial intelligence to predict crime, *Reliance Partners*, etc. Additionally, *Reliance Partners* maintain a cargo theft data portal focused on Mexico.[46]

Methods

In addition to literature review, this report builds structured case studies comparing cargo theft in Texas to that in Mexico using the Alexander George and Bennett Method of "structured focused comparison."[47] In this theory building methodology the researcher asks the same questions of the cases so they can be compared systematically for di erences and similarities and allow for "structured focused comparison."[48]

The Texas and Mexico cases were chosen from the universe of cases based on the homeland security importance of transportation sector insecurity. Mexico and the United States, especially Texas, constitute an integrated transportation market. One of the key research questions to answer is: What are the organized theft methodologies in each and how do they di er? While Texas and Mexico represent fundamentally di erent political units, Mexico as a nation-state and Texas as a sub-state within the United States, their shared border and high levels of economic integration through cross-border trade, the oil industry, and immigration flows, make the study of this integrated market and its implications for homeland security important. In building the case studies, the researcher conducted semi-structured expert interviews with experts focused on trucking security in Mexico and Texas.

Case Study Presentation

The following section presents the case studies of truck cargo theft in Texas and Mexico. The case studies following the method of structured focused comparison focus on the modus operandi or tactics, techniques, and procedures of organized crime truck cargo theft in the respective entities.

Texas Cargo Theft

Texas Trucking Network: Size and Scope

In building the Texas Cargo theft case study we must first discuss the size and scope of the trucking industry, a key component of the homeland security critical infrastructure sector for Transportation. Texas has "the largest highway and interstate network in the nation."[49] Trucking constitutes "12% of all vehicle miles travelled" and "1 in 16 Texans is employed by the trucking industry."[50] Further, 73% of all goods are transported via truck as is 85% of all Texas-Mexico trade. Texas has many of the nation's largest ports, including the largest deep-water port by tonnage (Port of Houston), which is the largest exporter (more than $328 billion), and has more than twenty-eight international land bridges.[51]

The Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) is implementing the Texas Mexico Border Transportation Master Plan which identified fifty-three projects with forty-two fully funded. These projects include El Paso Pacifico Railroad mainline improvements, the Laredo region world trade bridge fast lane construction and the Pharr bridge commercial vehicle staging project.[52] These are just some of the myriad drivers expanding the trucking industry's importance to economic development.

Texas Cargo Theft Tactics

Texas-based cargo theft tends to be based increasingly on what companies like *Overhaul* and other actors in the security trucking security sector call strategic cargo theft.[53] In short, it is based on theft by forgery and fraud. Sophisticated fraudulent documents have become the norm. The post pandemic environment, in which more work electronically, facilitated these changes. Prior to this, increased improvement in fraudulent documents, cargo theft was limited, particularly in the border zone. This was because US-Border Patrol checkpoints one hundred miles north of the border meant that Border Patrol would capture any stolen cargo at those checkpoints. Because of the improved counterfeit documents, cargo thieves in the United States are now able to quickly generate fraudulent documents. Thus, criminals can transport stolen cargo from the border zone to other parts of the United States quickly without fear of border checkpoints.[54] Indeed, it is possible the truck driver is unaware they are participating in the scheme, given they may be deceived.[55] Thus, law enforcement would not be able to rely on behavioral profiling to identify the driver of stolen cargo.

There tends to be less cargo theft in the border zone due to those security measures which are focused on immigration enforcement. Thus, increased enforcement has the ancillary benefit of improving Transportation Security.

Interviews indicated that there has been a preliminary increase in deaths in the border zone and that this may be a new trend.

S.L.A.B. Method

Shorted Load altered Bill of Lading (SLAB) is one method for strategic cargo theft. According to *Overhaul*, a double or triple brokered carrier will alter the bill of lading with a new cargo count and will remove one palette of materials. If the recipient does not check the original bill of lading the theft goes undetected.[56]

Straight Cargo Theft

While strategic theft in the US is dominant, there are theft crews which simply steal cargo typically when drivers leave them unattended. They can do this via surveillance and market research to maximize profits from the resold goods. Notably, this is less violent than Mexican hijacking which often involves kidnapping the driver or killing him.

Mini-Case Study Profile: Khalistan Cargo Cartel – Strategic Theft a Case Study

In its research and investigations, the private security firm *Overhaul* profiled the Khalistan cartel a network which uses sophisticated digital forgery to engage in strategic theft of trucking cargo in the United States. [57] It has more than 500 involved actors operating in more than 50 cells and is responsible for more than 10,000 thefts.[58]

The network is so named based on where many of the members are from Khalistan (India). Many of these individuals thus may be from the Sikh diaspora from India (entered via visas in Canada) some of which may seek Khalistan independence from India.[59]

Theft crews with strong market research can sometimes earn more than 100% the value of the stolen merchandise. This is possible for two reasons, (1) market research allows the theft crews to identify merchandise in high demand, (2) online vendors like EBAY eliminate the need for a "fence" or underground broker who will pay a fraction of the value. [60] This has e□ectively increased the demand for the crime by moving profits from 15% through a traditional "fence" to more than 100% via amazon, Walmart or other third-party platforms.[61]

US Government Responses to Cargo Theft

While numerous agencies have jurisdiction over various types of cargo theft, and there have been prosecutions, most cargo theft taskforces are in decline. Also, there are not universal databases that would allow buyers and sellers to share information and check the veracity of carriers.[62]

Mexico Cargo Theft

Size of Mexican Trucking

Mexico has an insu icient number of truck drivers according to CANACAR (Mexican truckers chamber) and needs about 50,000 more as of 2024.[63] According to Data Mexico, in 2025 the truck, van, and cargo drivers represented 1.28 million jobs in Mexico, 36% are informal workers, the average salary at current exchange rates is $456 per month, the average driver has a 10th grade education and works 47 hours per week.[64] The highest salaries for drivers are in states known for violence and corruption such as Colima (Highest homicide rate), Tamaulipas (known for corruption), and Michoacan (known as a cartel hotspot). [65] The largest workforces were in the states of Mexico, Jalisco, and Nuevo Leon (northern industrial hub 2 hours south of Texas).[66]

Organized Crime Involvement

Cargo theft in Mexico tends to be more predatory and violent. Larger cartels became more involved in the crime following the pandemic and the resultant increased media attention on cargo theft according to Danny Ramon, Director of Intelligence for *Overhaul* a private security firm focused on cargo theft. This is in part due to weaker rule of law institutions, and the pre-existing large, organized crime groups (OCGs) often referred to as Mexican "cartels."[67]

While it is di icult to study dark networks, it is likely that in the pre-pandemic environment many of the cargo theft crews were independent operators. During the pandemic, large OCGs identified cargo theft as a potential revenue generator. While independent crews were likely already paying tribute or a tax or *cuota* to larger OCGs to commit criminal acts in their territories (*plazas*), Mexican cartels have increasingly taken a direct hand in organized cargo theft. Cartels may be engaging in cargo theft directly, but also through the hostile takeovers of local criminal cells. Large cartels in Mexico use highways to transport drugs and thus maintain surveillance and intelligence over these roads. Any theft group could threaten large cartel drug loads, so these groups are likely to encounter each other. Thus, it is likely that large cartels have brought these groups under their sway and use them as proxies wherever they can.[68]

Mexican Truck Theft Methodologies

There tends to be less cargo theft in the border zone area established by these treaties. Interviews indicated that this was due to drug cartels not wanting to draw attention to cargo trucks moving drugs, their primary source of business.[69] Data indicates that the lion's share of cargo theft occurs within normal business hours Monday through Friday. Interviews and

open source reporting also indicated that Mexican organized crime use cargo trucking to smuggle migrants. Indeed, there have been high profile incidents where migrants have been transported in cargo trucks in Texas and died of heatstroke.[70]

Mexico, as part of NAFTA, has a 25-mile border zone south of the US-Mexico border, which the government and cartels—seeking to move drugs without drawing attention—police to prevent cargo theft in these lucrative corridors. While the United States, Canada, and Mexico have renegotiated NAFTA, the USMCA continues the structures established by NAFTA. Today, Mexico is the United States' largest trading partner with $932.1 billion of annual trade in 2024. [71]

Fake Checkpoints

Organized crime groups or theft crews oftentimes set up illegal checkpoints pretending to be law enforcement.[72] This allows them to stop truck drivers and look at the paperwork on their cargo. If the cargo is of value, they can then choose to steal the cargo. Maya Averbuch (Bloomberg) describes the use of fake check points and how drivers must be wary even of their cargo. She gives the example of a driver who feared trucking apples because they have a scent that thieves can easily smell and they are easy to resell. Averbuch found in her investigative reporting that criminals will target food or any good that could be easily resold. This is consistent with the literature on cargo theft, e.g., Coughlin finds that food products were the most common items stolen in cargo theft.[73]

Countermeasures

Theft crews have electronic devices that can limit the GPS on the trucks but require a significant power source to block GPS across the truck and the trailer. One interview indicated that Mexican cartels or OCGs have adapted to this by, in some cases, digging tunnels that they can park trailers in under 3 to 4 feet of ground. [74] This low-tech method mitigates GPS tracking signals. This is a significant infrastructure investment but takes advantage of what organized crime in Mexico has easy access to: cheap labor.

Kidnapping Drivers

Oftentimes 6-8 gunmen crews will kidnap drivers and hold them for 24 hours to prevent the reporting of crime and allow organized crime actors a 24-hour head start to sell any stolen goods.[75] In some cases drivers are killed: "Some 150 drivers were murdered in 2023, according to Christian Rauda, CEO of the logistics advisory company AI27."[76]

Locations

Most cargo theft in Mexico is in Mexico City and the surrounding states. This is in part due to the geographic position in Mexico City and the sheer number of roads coming in and out

providing all the strategic points or many of the strategic points for car theft on highways. Typically, goods transported from Mexico into the United States a to the US-Mexico border to a drop lot either on the US or Mexican side and then picked up by another driver to for transportation further into the United States. In the case of small businesses, lots could be little more than a parking lot.

Government Collusion and Cartel Policing?

Mexican cartels are not the only source of cargo theft in Mexico. Stefano Ritondale Chief of Intelligence for *Artorias* and owner of the All_Source_News account on X and other social media platforms, points to government corruption. Oftentimes, corrupt Mexican local and state o□icials, but also federal o□icials, will leverage local organized crime groups (OCGs) or theft crews and allow them to operate in these areas of control. This e□ectively allows cargo theft to operate with impunity.

Ironically, cartels that do not want these criminals operating in their areas will enforce control over their territory and target these theft crews for death. According to public postings by Ritondale, there are examples of OCGs executing these cargo theft crews. These OCGs also name specific government actors which are corruptly allowing the cargo theft crews to operate and profit from their activities. This allows these cartels to act like Robin Hoods; a phenomenon pointed out by John P. Sullivan using Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "social banditry" wherein criminal actors win social legitimacy by currying favor with the local population.[77] By killing the theft crews, large cartels or OCGs can publicize their *bona fides* in the provision of "justice."

One example published by Ritondale under *All_Source_News* on X, included a video of the Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) and its special forces unit *Operativa Barredora*. In the video six masked/well-armed gunmen stand around two individuals, one of them blindfolded, who they claim were part of a local criminal group specifically engaged in transportation robberies and human smuggling. The video goes on to name numerous government o□icials including the governor of the state of Puebla as involved in these activities and condemning these illegal activities.[78] This is not the only public reporting of cartels policing this illicit activity. In another example, CJNG operatives released a video in 2020 claiming Ismael Zambada, aka El Mayo, a Sinaloa Cartel leader, was behind the theft of a truck carrying cigarettes.[79]

While it is di□icult to analyze the veracity of such social media claims, given weak rule of law in Mexico and corrupt government o□icials, it is not surprising that OCGs or corrupt government o□icials would engage in providing impunity in exchange for payments from local criminals engaged in hijacking. This has the e□ect of allowing OCGs to police this

activity and legitimately claim that they are acting where the government does not. This fits into their illegal information warfare claims and further weakens the state.[80]

Extortion

Extortion is a major part of avoiding cargo theft. Organized crime groups often violently threatened companies and truck drivers and threatened theft, to enforce regular extortion payments. This allows OCGs to tax their territory as they engage in increasingly predatory and territorial models of business.[81] The diversification of criminal activities is part of the expansion into territorial business models. [82]

Mexican Government Responses

There are successful examples of the police intelligence units in the state of Mexico using cameras and surveillance to stop cargo theft in real time but often prosecutors are unwilling to conduct large investigations to dismantle these cells.[83] The National Guard Force newly constituted in 2019 by the previous President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), relies heavily on preventive patrols, but has little investigative capacity.[84] Under the Sheinbaum administration the Mexican government has implemented the BALAM strategy and later in July 2025 the National Guard implemented the implemented the "Zero Cargo Transportation Thefts" strategy.[85]

Sledge describes the Balam strategy as:

> President Sheinbaum has also collaborated with the National Guard since her inauguration to revamp the BALAM (Biodiversity, Agriculture, Livelihoods, Adaptation & Mitigation to Climate Change) strategy. The BALAM strategy was originally installed to promote environmental security and sustainability across Mexico, although given the increase in cargo hijackings and updates to National Guard functions, President Sheinbaum has begun to use the strategy to bolster security resources on the highways. As part of the new BALAM initiative with the National Guard, over 400 patrol cars, 37 drones, helicopters, and emergency phones have been placed along highways most a□ected by the hijackings.[86]

Another key finding from interviews was that often private security firms working in Mexico conducted their own investigations and were able to present ready made prosecutions to local and state law enforcement agencies. A common problem in Mexico was an unwillingness to prosecute these types of cases. Private security firms found that they could use the legal system to e□ectively force prosecutors to bring cargo theft cases to fruition, which led to successful prosecutions, but only after significant legal pressure.[87]

US-Mexico Implications of the Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation

As Mark Vickers describes, American and Mexican companies may become increasingly cautious about paying extortion fees given the United States has designated six major Mexican cartels as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs). [88] Similarly, these firms may fear prosecution under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.[89] The cartels designated as FTOs include: the Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Sinaloa, La Nueva Familia Michoacana, Cartel del Noreste (CDN), Gulf Cartel, and Carteles Unidos (CU). Paying an extortion fee to criminal organizations working directly for or paying "tax" to one of these major cartels could result in prosecutions against American individuals and companies for their support of terrorism.[90] This could also lead to US Treasury designations by the O□ice of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) which would freeze assets for any entity or individual in business with these organizations. As Galdo argues, businesses operating in Mexico should expect more scrutiny given the new regulatory environment.[91]

Given these potential legal threats, an ecosystem of private security and legal firms is emerging to address the supply chain issues and provide vetting. While this has expanded since the 2025 FTO designations, many firms such as Overhaul and Reliance Partners were already operating in this space.

Key issues included insurance on cargo in Mexico which had long been insu□icient and or had impossibly high deductibles. Private firms such as Reliance Partners and subsidiaries were able to establish a□ordable insurance policies that were profitable for insurance companies because the losses were low due to compliance requirements. These compliance requirements included driving on toll roads rather than non-toll road highways with higher theft rates.[92]

Since the FTO designation, these firms and other market entrants have created new tools to avoid conducting business with potential FTOs. For example, law firms such as Sesma and McNeese based in Monterrey provided clients with compliance research and legal advice. These e□orts led to the establishment of the *Confianza* Platform providing a platform to match pre-vetted Mexican cargo carrier companies to potential US logistics customers.[93] New AI startups such as Vector9 seek to leverage AI to generate risk assessments to minimize legal business entity interaction with illicit supply chains.[94] These are just some of the myriad firms entering and expanding a private security firm ecosystem relating to the FTO designations and cargo security.

Conclusions

The security of the shared transportation infrastructure between the United States and Mexico is more important than ever as the United States engages in a pivot to the Western Hemisphere as it engages and implements a policy of “flexible realism” as embodied in the new National Security Strategy of 2025 from the Trump administration. Thus, this look at one of the key drags (cargo hijacking) on US-Mexico trade and the domestic economies of both countries is timely and critical. In comparing the two case studies, fundamentally di erent types of illicit networks parasitically feeding from legal trade were found.

Key Di erences

Cargo hijacking in Texas is increasingly moving toward strategic theft whereas in Mexico it is more likely to be straight theft involving violent hijacking. Based on expert interviews, 8 out of 10 times in the Mexican context the driver will face some level of violent threat including kidnapping for 24 hours to move the goods or being killed. In the United States when there is simple hijacking it is usually nonviolent based on intelligence, and when the truck is parked. These key di erences can be explained by stronger rule of law institutions in the United States which emphasize prosecuting violent crimes and thus deter them. Because of this emphasis, property crimes are less likely to be investigated and get the investigative resources necessary to break apart and disrupt decentralized networks such as the Khalistan cartel as presented by the private security freight company *Overhaul*.

Key Similarities

Both forms of cargo hijacking can be sophisticated and have high levels of criminal of crime complexity as John Bailey describes in the context of Mexican security.[95] While Mexican cartels or small organized crime theft crews may use more violence and threat of violence, they nonetheless conduct significant intelligence on the nature of the loads and the market value of those loads.

Policy recommendations

Both Mexico and the United States should emphasize investigation in their response to these theft networks.[96] The United States has a long history of galvanizing disparate law enforcement agencies in major metro areas into multijurisdictional taskforces that can engage in complex investigations.[97] These will require the cooperation of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies and the various skills and legal jurisdictions they each bring to potential RICO prosecutions.

Cooperation and vigilance in the private sector will also be critical. Both nations should take advantage of the growing private sector ecosystem, related to cargo security, compliance and supply chain awareness that has increased dramatically following the US government's designation of six Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. As interviews indicated, these firms often provided valuable information for prosecutions and in the case of Mexico, even pushed the legal system toward prosecution of cases when there was a lack of will.

As reporting by Nathaniel Parish Flannery points out, "Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum has promised to work to boost police investigations into hijacking networks and improve highway security."[98] Mexico also needs to focus on building the investigative capacity of the *Guardia Nacional* which has taken the lead in addressing cargo theft on federal highways. Unfortunately, the lines of control within the National Guard are primarily military, meaning there is less institutional history of complex investigations and experience that is required to bring these cases to prosecution.[99] AMLO disbanded the Mexican Federal Police in 2019. [100] Those agents had strong investigative capacities and Mexico City state police hired many of them. Secretary of Public Safety and Security Omar Garcia Harfuch may be establishing a new federal investigative agency realizing the need for quality investigators.[101] While this agency is likely to focus on targeting high level organized crime, this could have the ancillary benefit of revealing their connections to cargo theft networks. Optimally, both the National Guard and the new federal police force would establish Mexican task forces to investigate and dismantle these networks. Likewise in the United States there should be greater emphasis investigative taskforces focused on cargo theft.

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Disclaimer

The Institute for Homeland Security at Sam Houston State University does not endorse any specific product or service discussed in this report.

Endnotes

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