

Teun Voeten, *Mexican Drug Violence: Hybrid Warfare, Predatory Capitalism and the Logic of Cruelty*, N.p: Small Wars Journal - El Centro, 2020 (438 pp.), ISBN : 978-1-6641-3415 - 7 (Softcover, US \$ 23.99); ISBN : 978-1-6641-3416 -4 (E-book, US \$ 7.99).

Reviewed by Martijn Kitzen

What happens when a veteran war photographer enters the realm of academia in order to share his observations on one of the most vicious conflicts in the Western hemisphere? *Mexican Drug Violence* provides an exciting answer to this question as it convincingly demonstrates that Teun Voeten's more than 30-year long career of covering conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and the Americas allows him to arrive at unique insights into the complicated dynamics of Mexico's drug wars which cost between 120,000 and 230,000 lives between 2006 and 2019.

On the basis of research work conducted for a PhD in cultural anthropology at Leiden University, Voeten sets out to develop an analytical model for understanding the nature of the Mexican drug wars, their economic background and their hyper-violence. For this purpose, the author adopted both a macro-perspective and micro-level analysis which benefit from the combination of rich empirical data obtained during extensive field research in Mexico as well as from a wealth of insights gained in other conflicts he observed at close quarters. Voeten characterizes Mexican drug violence as hybrid warfare in which actors are driven by a predatory form of capitalism leading to circumstances wherein participants see merit in committing atrocities. This review will briefly highlight the three themes of the volume's subtitle.

First, the Mexican drug wars can, according to the author, best be understood as an example of hybrid warfare—a merger of organized crime, irregular guerrilla conflict and terrorism, fought for mainly economic reasons thriving under circumstances of ongoing violence. While this resembles to some extent the *New Wars* paradigm introduced by Mary Kaldor and Herfried Münkler, the author of the present study argues that the situation in Mexico has evolved beyond that idea. Voeten, therefore, opts for applying hybrid warfare as a concept for analyzing what he labels 'new wars on steroids', i.e. multidimensional conflicts characterized by blurred distinctions between various actors and their (brutal) activities (pp.194-195). In this particular case, the hybrid character can best be understood through not less than seven different, interconnected layers that capture the dynamics between various competing cartels and the state. Voeten's hybrid warfare perspective proves useful for understanding both conflicts and actors involved. The author seeks to demonstrate the general value of his analytical categories by exploring their applicability also in other conflict theatres where he gained first-hand experience, including in Iraq and Syria.

Second, Voeten explores the economic dimension, that is, how Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTO's) are functioning in a hyper-capitalist economy. He sees the cartels as enterprises operating at the predatory end of capitalism, offering an explanation for the emergence and persistence of the cartels. The author sees a connection between neo-liberalist policies and growing inequality. As the have-nots of neo-liberalism are increasingly confronted with the wealth of the upper class, an expectations gap develops. This triggers what has euphemistically been called alternative modes of redistribution – crime. It is widely accepted that some forms of crime are a self-help strategy in a hyper-capitalist environment; in fact, the cartels themselves legitimize their actions in this way. Over the last decades globalization has acted as a catalyst in this process, as it enhances the perception of inequality, while also enabling criminal organizations to exploit new opportunities in an increasingly interconnected world.

Third, even seemingly "senseless" atrocities can, according to the author, be understood as serving a specific purpose. Although extreme violence is typically dismissed as irrational, in reality the motives of individual killers are often the result of rational calculations that seek to optimize the perpetrators' chances of survival in a hostile environment. Here Voeten's international experience as a war reporter again serves him to illustrate that this is not only true for the *sicarios* [hired killers] he interviewed in Mexico's prisons, but also pertains to American gang members and West African Child soldiers. At the micro-level, the act of killing is enabled by

cross-cultural mechanisms that reveal a disturbing logic underlying cruelty.

In sum, *Mexican Drug Violence* provides both a unique analysis of the Mexican case and offers an original threefold model for better understanding similar conflicts. Voeten's analytical approach is highly useful in applying the same framework to other cases. The author's additional sixth chapter on drug trafficking and crime in the Netherlands and Belgium can indeed be considered as Voeten's own attempt to do so. The creation of a new analytical model is the volume's main merit, demonstrating, in this reviewer's opinion, that he is as proficient in utilizing an anthropological academic lens as the war reporter's photographic lens to his objects of study.

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