

Submission	Review Process	Revised	Accepted	Published
02-07-2023	04-08 s/d 17-10-2023	25-11-2023	30-11-2023	31-12-2023

Jurnal Studi Sosial dan Politik. Vol. 7, No.2, December 31, 2023 (177-192)

ISSN: 2597-8756

E-ISSN: 2597-8764

Jurnal Studi Sosial dan Politik Published by Fisip, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang

Green Gold in Peril: How the Mexican Cartels Threaten the Michoacan Avocado Production

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Abstract

The avocado industry has been an important piece in Mexico's economy. Known as the "green gold", most avocados are produced in Michoacan, the most suitable region in Mexico to grow them. The avocado industry also brings huge benefits like the avocado boom that has created countless jobs in Mexico. However, the Michoacan avocado production has been the target of the cartels as they seek to gain control over them. Through the use of qualitative research methods, the article seeks to explain the ways cartels pose a threat to the Michoacan avocado production, the reason behind the cartels entry to the industry, the bleak prospects if they are left unhandled including how the governments can take care of it. The article finds that the cartels threaten Michoacan avocado production through its violent measures as its means to gain control of it. The motivation behind the cartels' race to control the industry can be pointed to Mexico's political development and the industry's exponential boom. Moreover, the urgency for the government's decisive action is explained through the bleak prospects brought by the cartels which range from deterioration of Mexico's national institution to economic repercussions. The article ends with elaboration on the ways the government can respond to the issue which could be done through the act of securitization and cooperating with other states, notably the US as the biggest buyer of avocados from Michoacan and Mexico's neighbor.

Keywords: Non-Traditional Security Threat, Michoacan, Cartel, Avocado, Mexico

Abstrak

Industri alpukat merupakan salah satu komponen penting dalam ekonomi Meksiko. Dikenal sebagai “emas hijau”, mayoritas alpukat tersebut diproduksi di Michoacan, kawasan di Meksiko yang paling cocok untuk menanamnya. Industri alpukat juga memberikan berbagai manfaat seperti melalui fenomena *avocado boom* yang menciptakan banyak lapangan pekerjaan di Meksiko. Namun, produksi alpukat di Michoacan telah menjadi target aktivitas para kartel yang berkepentingan untuk mengontrolnya. Melalui penggunaan metode riset kualitatif, artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan bagaimana para kartel menjadi ancaman terhadap produksi alpukat di Michoacan, alasan di balik masuknya para kartel ke industri itu, dampak negatif yang dapat dibawa para kartel jika pemerintah tidak menanganinya, serta bagaimana pemerintah Meksiko dapat mengatasi ancaman kartel tersebut. Artikel ini menemukan bahwa para kartel menjadi ancaman melalui berbagai tindak kekerasan sebagai bagian dari upaya menguasai industri itu. Motivasi di balik ketertarikan kartel untuk menguasai industri alpukat dapat diatribusikan pada perkembangan politik Meksiko serta pertumbuhan eksponensial industri alpukat. Selain itu, urgensi bagi penanganan dari pemerintah Meksiko dijelaskan melalui prospek suram dari aktivitas kartel yang berupa memburuknya institusi nasional Meksiko hingga dampak ekonomi. Artikel diakhiri dengan elaborasi terkait bagaimana pemerintah dapat menangani isu itu melalui sekuritisasi dan kerjasama dengan negara lain, terutama Amerika Serikat sebagai pembeli alpukat Meksiko terbesar serta tetangga Meksiko sendiri.

Kata Kunci: Ancaman Keamanan Non-Tradisional, Michoacan, Kartel, Alpukat, Meksiko

INTRODUCTION

Avocado is one of high-valued agricultural commodities in Mexico. Based on Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) data, in 2020 there was 6.2% increase in avocado exports reaching up to nearly 1.4 million tonnes. Mexico dominates the global avocado market with 60-65% grand total export quantities, thanks to the capability of producing the fruit in all seasons and the higher quality of Hass variety. There is a high demand of Mexico's avocado, specifically from the United States where it made up to 80% in 2020 and 2021 alone (Karst, 2023). Agricultural industry, especially avocados, are bringing a lot to the table. Hence, avocados are called “green gold”. However, avocado farmers are still struggling with poverty. Why is that? Because cartels are involved, avocado production has become a bloody business. In general, cartels refer to a group of producers or suppliers with the purpose of perpetuating prices at high level and regulating competition. However, in this particular case, it specifically refers to organized crime groups in Mexico that have a litany of underhand businesses, notably drug trade, that also partake in the general businesses of cartels. Specifically speaking, Mexican cartels have been associated with drugs and other illicit businesses, but due to profitable and promising business they are moving towards avocado production (Mislawaty, Harahap & Anisyah, 2022). As it turns out, miracles brought about by avocados not only attract farmers, rather it attracts unwanted attention from the cartels.

According to reports from the Boston Globe in 2022, cartels control over avocado production has escalated violence and extortion in the region, resulting in criminal cases such as murder. The Jalisco New Generation cartel murdered nine people in 2019. The murder took place in Uruapan, the hub of Michoacan avocado distribution. Not only murdered, but the victims also received inhumane treatment, their corpses were hanging from an overpass in the city. Another seven bodies were also dumped at the same spot, but this time it was a warning towards a rival, The Viagras (Miller, 2022). In the same year, USDA investigators were also robbed and intimidated by violence by the cartels. Threats aimed at USDA investigators resulted in a temporary avocado export ban. Being one of the commodities with most demand, the temporary ban on avocados significantly impacted Mexico's economy.

This temporary avocado ban also affected the United States. Michoacan avocados, especially Hass varieties, suit the American palate because of its texture and its color. The government tried to import Hass avocados from other avocado producing countries such as Columbia and Peru but it did not sell well because Americans thought Hass avocados produced outside Mexico are low in quality. Domestic producers in California cannot keep up with the demand either. The government also tried to introduce green skin avocados from Florida and The Caribbeans, however it was also not popular with American customers because of its texture and confusion to indicate ripeness (Khadijah et al., 2022). The avocado ban was finally lifted in February 2022. Both countries sighed in relief, avocado distribution is now back to normal. However, the root problem of Michoacan avocado hasn't been resolved yet. The cartels are still going on a rampage—threatening stakeholders regarding avocado production (Syawaluddin, 2023). As a result, farmers and those who are involved in avocado production join forces to come up with a self-defence group. They have their own fair share of arms. The situation has escalated into an open confrontation between cartels and Michoacan avocado producers with minimum government intervention.

Previous studies regarding Michoacan avocado and its relationship with Mexican cartels have been published before. For instance, Ornelas (2018) has highlighted how cartels' predatory actions toward Michoacan avocado business has impacted economic growth. Furthermore, Ornelas (2018) specified predatory measure that cartels used to drain the industry is extortion by extracting rents from Michoacan avocado export market during 2001-2014 period. Key points obtained from Ornelas (2018) are: (1) organized crime group in Michoacan has evolved from time to time, with Knight Temper (KT) as the dominant group in 2011 to do illegal activities; (2) extortions done by cartels have done significant damage towards Michoacan economy by causing sharp downturn in primary sector in 2006 and 2009—triggering increased violence in the region, negative growth rate, and discourages productive investment by the private sector. Another study conducted by Erickson & Owen (2020a) shows that cartels have expanded their business into licit goods (Michoacan avocado) and hypothesize that increasing demand in Michoacan avocados is directly proportional to increasing cartel violence. Erickson & Owen (2020a) interesting finding demonstrates that United States involvement with phytosanitary policy is effective to decrease cartel homicides. This research paper uses non-traditional security theoretical framework and focuses on United States-Mexico collaboration to counter cartels in Michoacan avocado business.

With the reflection of the preceding research overtures of the topic in mind, the purpose of this research paper sets itself out is to explain how the Mexican cartels threaten the Michoacan avocado production, as the heart of Mexico's avocado production, through their violent measures and control over the industry (Viana, 2023). This research paper also covers the motive behind cartels involvement in the avocado production industry, their impact towards the industry, and the paths that Mexico can take to repulse or curtail further damage towards the Michoacan avocado production.

RESEARCH METHOD

In providing the analysis, the qualitative research method is used. Qualitative research method begins with determining the guiding questions, collecting the data, qualitatively interpreting the data and concluding the research (Bryman, 2012). The aforementioned method is chosen to allow the writers comprehend the chosen issue that entails perception, action, and preference (Moleong, 2018). The article uses the secondary data procured through internet-based research that consists of relevant past studies, media coverages, and government reports as a foundation for the analysis. The level of analysis that is being used for this would primarily be the state level as it would be reflected on the national security issue Mexico is being faced with. In analyzing the data, the writers would use relevant concepts like national security to build its forthcoming argument (Yusnita & Anisyah, 2023). Through incorporating said method and conceptual framework, the writers would then seek to elucidate on the many ways the Mexican cartels, as a non-traditional security threat, threaten the Michoacan avocado plans and eventually the bigger picture of Mexico's national security (Ritonga & Harahap, 2023). The same stride is also taken in the effort to explain what further disregard to the issue at hand may bring in the future along with the ways the government can handle the problem.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

How the cartels pose as a threat to Mexico's avocado production in Michoacan

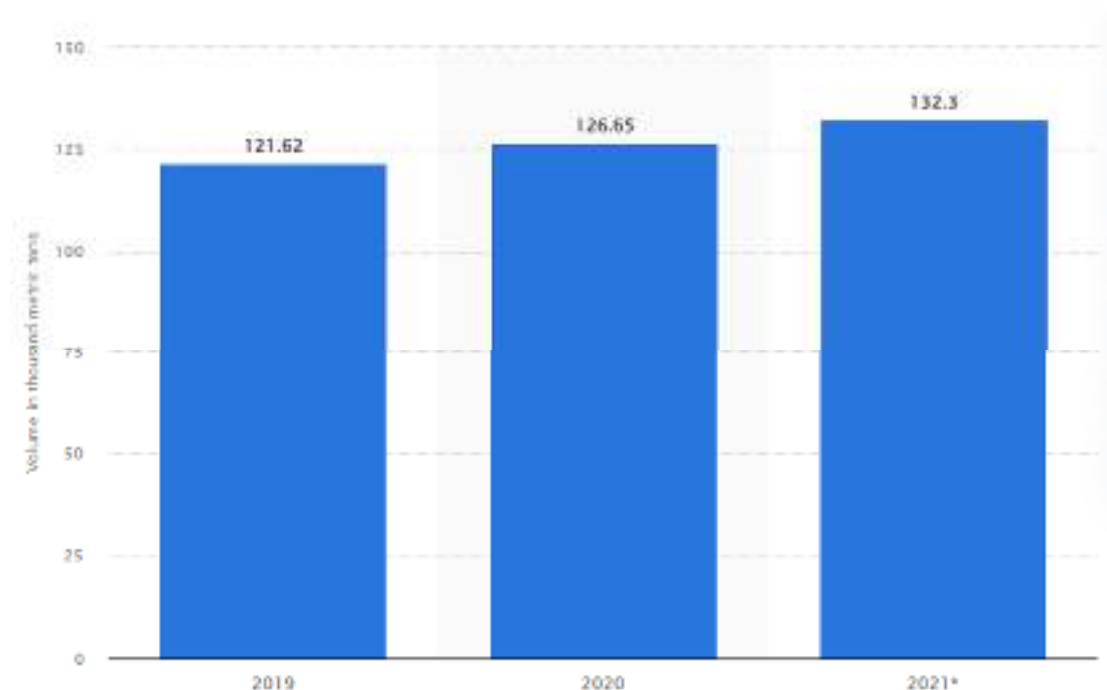
Mexico is the world's biggest avocado producer as it supplies up to 65% of avocados in global trade (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023). As the "green gold", avocados have brought prosperity to the country. In Mexico, the region responsible for the production of the avocados is Michoacan. Michoacan is considered the best region to grow avocados due to its climate which allows avocados to grow for the entirety of the year. Avocados produced in Michoacan have been a huge commodity especially in Mexico's trade with the US. Avocado trade between the US and Mexico has been on a steady increase for the past 7 years (Garay, 2021). The US has been the biggest importer of Mexico's avocados, especially following the lifting of Mexico avocado import ban back in 1997. The avocado production in Michoacan also has contributed to Mexico's economic growth through the creation of countless jobs. This phenomenon would be known as the avocado boom. Unfortunately, apart from benefitting the regular Mexicans, the avocado boom would also attract cartels who seek to diversify its sources of income.

One of the ways cartels assert their control and gain benefits from the avocado production is through limiting the production of the fruit. The limitation would be done to decrease the supply of avocados in the market which later would allow the prices to increase (Fitriyana, Pudjiastuti & Izomiddin, 2023). At times, the cartels would find their

demand facing some opposition from the farmers, but they could quickly suppress it through violent measures on them. The measures done by the cartels could range from kidnapping to gruesome murder of those it deems troublesome to their interest. It is no surprise that the farmers would be forced to succumb to the cartels' demand considering the threat they are faced with. The cartels also steal truckloads of avocados from the farmers, making avocado theft rampant. Against that backdrop, other cartel groups charge protection money to the producers where they would pay a certain amount of money per hectare cultivated or exported (Rainsford, 2019). If the producers fail to pay the fee, the aforementioned violent measures would be done.

The cartels' presence and control over avocado productions in Michoacan is not something other countries content with. The US, despite being the biggest consumer of the produce, is known to make serious measures in responding to it. One of which is the temporary ban put upon Mexican avocados in February 2022 (Rivers, 2022). It was done as a response to threats received by US inspectors in Mexico. In Mexican avocado's popularity growth, US inspectors play an important role as they supervise and inspect the product qualities before they arrive in US markets (Ramadhan, Izomiddin & Zalpa, 2022). They work in all stages of the production, from the orchards where the avocados are grown to when the avocados are shipped out. Because of that, they could be subjected to threats from the cartels as they are not pleased with the inspectors' presence (Creswell, 2022). Returning to the suspension, the move came out as a surprise considering how it was made during one of the biggest events in the US that has been using avocados in huge quantities, that is the Super Bowl. Avocado is one of the key ingredients to the foods that are served in the event (Rudo, 2021). Given the strong attraction of the event, with the 2023 Super Bowl being attended to by almost 70.000 fans in the US, it doesn't come out as a surprise that a high amount of them are needed. To meet the need for the 2020 Super Bowl alone, 1,400 trucks left the state of Michoacan for the US every week with plentiful shipments of avocados (Castrodale, 2020). To get a better picture of the event's significant demand for avocados, a look into the export data of Michoacan avocados from 2019 to 2021 can provide just that. Throughout the period, there was an increase of around 10 metric tons of avocados exported for the event (Villa Navaro, 2023). As the data shows, the event's demand for avocados has been consistently growing prior to the release of the ban, not to mention the already enormous amount of avocado export for that occasion (Rohmaniyah et al, 2023). Fortunately, as laid out by the Associated Press, the following ban did not pose a threat to the event's need for avocados due to them being already shipped prior to ban's release.

Figure 1. Exports volume of Michoacan avocados for the Super Bowl from 2019 to 2020



Source: P. Navarro Villa, 2023

Aside from the huge demand from the Super Bowl, avocados has been one of the staples among many Americans, especially following the lifting of Mexican Avocado ban back in 1997. Hence, many feared that the suspension would result in a nationwide supply shortage. Fortunately, the suspension was lifted in less than a week as both parties, the US and Mexican authorities, have met to settle the issue. However, it is wrong to consider it as an end to the threats posed by the cartels towards the avocado production in Michoacan.

The cartels are indeed interested in avocado production, so much so that they would go beyond that scope as well. Apart from the avocado production itself, there are also other areas of interest that the cartels are involved in but still related to the aforementioned avocado production. Aside from being known as the heartland of Mexico's avocado production, Michoacan is also home to some of nature's wonders, notably the monarch butterflies. The butterflies have not been faring well in the midst of the avocado and timber industries growth. monarch butterflies are mainly found at butterfly reserves around Michoacan. The tourism sector at Michoacan relies on them to attract tourists and they have been negatively affected by the cartels (Weitenberg, 2022). At times, they would gain control of lands previously used for other purposes, like the butterfly reserve, to accommodate the expansion of the avocado production. For instance, back in 2020, Homero Gómez González, an activist for butterfly and forest preserve of Michoacan, was found murdered. He was known to be active in the forest and butterfly preservation movement, a move that was against the cartels' interest to expand the industries they have gotten a hold of, notably timber and avocado (Bremner, 2021).

Through that example, it can be understood how the cartels' interest over avocado production also threatens the security of other sectors in Michoacan.

Why the cartels are after avocados

Upon first glance, many may have associated cartels, especially the ones in Mexico, with illicit activities like drug smuggling and trade. That may be true but only to some extent, especially upon further consideration of two developments the cartels bore witness to. First is the government's war on drugs that began under President Felipe Calderón back in 2006 (O'Dowd & Hagan, 2020). The severity of said campaign can be seen in how 25 of the top 37 drug kingpins in Mexico would end up either killed or captured over the course of the campaign (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). In initiating the campaign, the government mobilized its troops to regions where the cartels' violent campaigns ran rampant, one of them being Michoacan. The campaign to confront the cartels and cease their violent activities in the country eventually resulted in many of the cartels to diversify both as a group and in their activities (Lakhani & Tirado, 2016). The move to do so can be attributed to the growing adverse condition as a result of the government's vehement effort that saw many of the ring leaders out of the game hence cutting down on the amount of drugs that made it to the streets (Wells, 2020). The drop of supply would eventually reduce the amount of cartels that rely on that commodity, leaving others to move and look for something else.

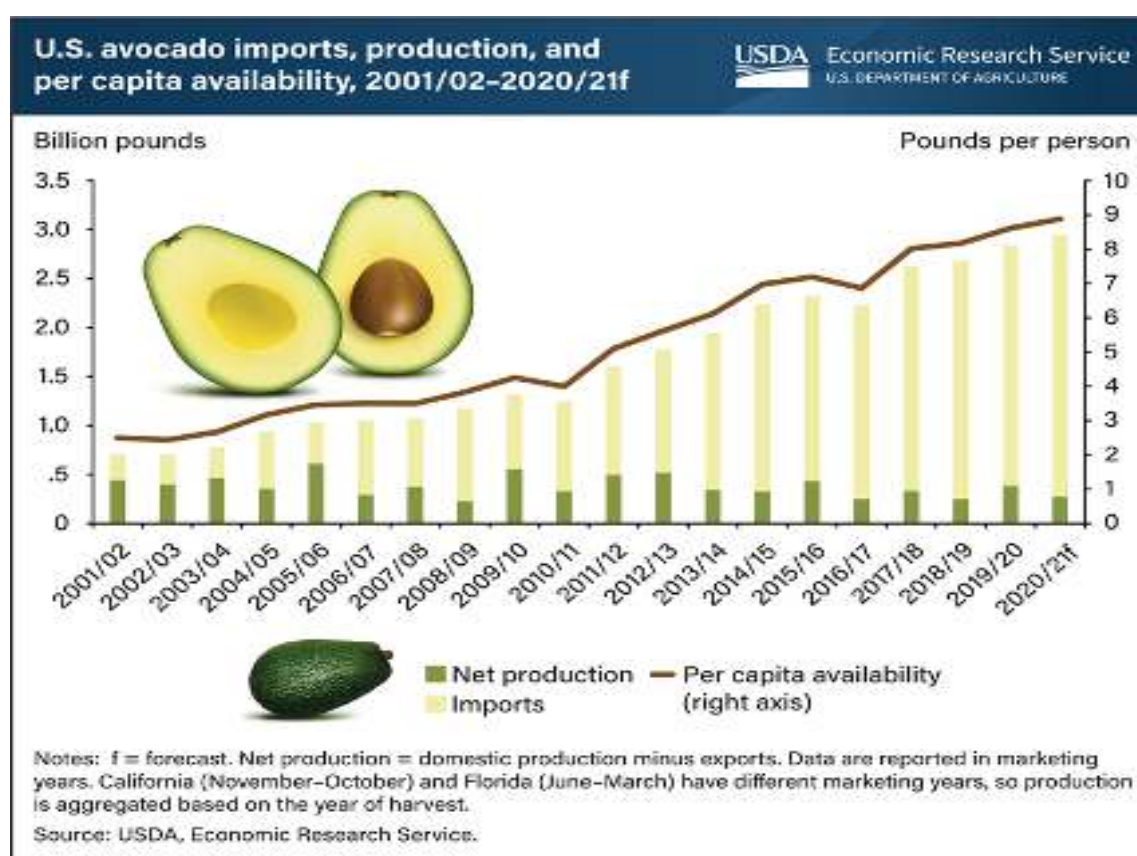
The second development is the exponential growth of avocado production, better known as the avocado boom. The avocado boom's beginning can be traced back to the late 20th century. Around that time, the long ban imposed by the United States on Mexican avocado was finally lifted which would be followed by the huge export of avocados to fulfill the American demands for the green gold. One region in particular that is Michoacan has been benefited greatly considering that most of Mexico's avocados are harvested there. The opening of the import tap of avocado from Mexico would eventually drive avocado's popularity as a food staple in the US.

The picture below provided by the US Department of Agriculture expresses such growth. (United States Department of Agriculture, 2022). From the year of 2001 to 2020, it can be seen how the share between imported and domestically produced avocado continues to be dominated by the latter. Moreover, as the stats indicates, the growing demand for avocado in the US is also paired with the declining domestic production of avocado there which is a suitable landscape for avocado imports from Mexico to thrive. Such a case can be made given the growing trend of consumption that the US has witnessed over the decades as apparent in the growing number of avocado consumed per person in the US which has tripled to around 8 pounds per person. The attractiveness of avocados as the green gold and the existence of a close and big market in the US for it would be made all the more prominent as Mexico would continue to dominate the US avocado market. In the 2022-2023 period, the US has witnessed yet another growth of avocado import volume from Mexico that amounts to 1.12 million metric tons. Said amount accounts for a 23% increase from 881,705 metric tons back in 2017-2018 (Karst, 2023).

Apart from the economic incentives, the avocado boom also directly brings 70,000 jobs for the people of Michoacan (Thelmadatter, 2021). The huge workforce the

industry absorbs is also in line with the amount of land it has as its basis for production that amounts to the size of 196,000 football fields just in Michoacan alone (Ayala, 2020). Therefore, should the cartels decide to shift their modes of profit to green gold, they will not need to start from scratch given the already existing, not to mention sundry, avocado production means. In addition to that, the cartels, as elaborated previously, did not necessarily need to use brute force at the start. As opposed to quickly solidifying their iron grip, they can start with a rather humble beginning by merely giving the farmers security support over the avocado plans, given the instability that infested Mexico throughout the days of the war on drugs, in return for money. It was only in the coming years that they would take a more aggressive stride to solidify their grip over the green gold. Hence, the flexibility that the avocado plans offer, profit wise, can also be taken as another supporting attribute that would lead the cartels to resort to it.

Picture 1. Growth of US avocado imports from the year 2001 to 2020



Source: US Department of Agriculture, 2022

Taken together, the aforementioned two matters contributed to the Cartels' race for the green gold. With the growing presence or surveillance by the government in illicit drug activities, the cartels need to diversify their criminal activities. In diversifying their activities, the avocado boom that Michoacan is witnessing also caught the attention of the cartels. What then began with money laundering and a balanced security service the cartels do in Michoacan eventually turned into the problem that is threatening the region. Moreover, the change of regime within Mexico that also brought the end to the prior war on drugs and changes in the government's approach, the cartels can finally have the space to re-establish themselves and at the same time remain in control of their new legal

businesses. It is against the backdrop of domestic circumstances that the cartels are now manifesting themselves into the growing avocado industry in Michoacan (Stoett & Omrow, 2021).

What further disregard may bring to the table

Further disregard or government incapacities in properly responding to the cartels would have negative repercussions to Mexico. One of them would be the way it would negatively affect Mexico's national security, notably the institutional base. The cartels, despite their strong presence and resources, do not threaten the physical base of a state in the way insurgency or separatist movements do. This is because their main interest revolves around economic matters (the way they obtain their income through their illicit practices) with no desire to gain total control, either in Michoacan or Mexico. Moving back to the institutional base, the way cartels threaten or undermine it is not through total eradication of the state authority at Michoacan, but rather through cutting off the people from them. By doing that, the people would be left alone with no overarching authority they can rely on. It is in such a condition that the cartels can perform their violent campaign with impunity and eventually fulfill their interest. The Mexican authority has a record of being overwhelmed in dealing with the cartels (Brenner, 2021). Such incapacity in providing a strong state response is also made worse by how the cartels have also consolidated their control over those institutions as well.

With such conditions laid out, it is no surprise that people have gotten so desperate and helpless that many have decided to play along the demands of the cartels. The desire of the people involved in the avocado production to be set free from the insecurity is palpable, so much so that they decided to seek protection from private security contractors or by forming one themselves. This development can also be considered as a proof of the state's institutional base deterioration. This can be understood by how the people no longer believe that they can rely on the government or the state's authority for security. Moreover, the prolongment of insecurity would also contribute to the aforementioned deterioration of the institution base. The insecurity present in Michoacan would be a direct result of a stronger control by the cartels in the area if no concrete steps are yet to be taken. Violence has been the very instrument the cartels utilize in their activity across Mexico (Erickson & Owen, 2020b). Such use is not only exclusive to the use against harsh opposition posed by rival cartels or local authorities. The use of violence is also aimed to cement their control or dominance in their territory as well (Cartel Chronicles, 2019). In this case, the cartels make use of it within the state of Michoacan. Violence is used to assert dominance and gain the people's obedience so as to follow their demands.

The failure to provide security to the people, especially those involved in the avocado production, would also have economic impact. With the current condition of insecurity there, the avocado production may not be able run conveniently especially as the cartels are still around despite the presence of the civilian defense group. The current state of insecurity supports the maintenance of violent activities in the region, both performed by the cartels in their power consolidation and by the people who seek to be free from them. Such prolongement would also affect the region's stability and may as well make the region spiral down into chaos. If that keeps up, it may only be a matter of time for the avocado production in Michoacan to face its downfall.

Apart from the domestic impact that would be inflicted, the international response to what is going on in Mexico's avocado production also needs to be taken into account. Take the US for instance. As one of the biggest trading partners and buyers of Avocados from Michoacan, the US is a prominent state Mexico needs to deal with. The US does not take the cartel problem lightly, especially when it also threatens its people on the field. Such was the case that led to the suspension of avocado export from Michoacan. Although the suspension was lifted in a few days, the event showed how fragile the avocado production is to external disruption (Bekiempis, 2022). It is also helpful to look at the bigger picture of the economic ties between the US and Mexico, notably in the bilateral trade between the two neighbors. In 2022, Mexico had enjoyed a \$131.1 billion trade surplus from the US in 2022. Export wise, still in 2022, Mexico also witnessed considerable growth in its export to the US which amounted to 18.9 percent (\$72.2 billion) compared to 2021. As reported by the US Department of Commerce, Mexico is the US's second biggest trading partner and it has taken into account the plenty of market opportunities both sides can benefit from (International Trade Administration, 2023). However, given the tempest of insecurity that has plagued Mexico's avocado production, along with the concrete threat it posed to the people of the US, it is not ludicrous for the US to turn its attention elsewhere, towards a more secured partner. Such a shift in the overall economic outlook would certainly be a significant blow to Mexico given the huge market the US has been in for the past decades.

Aside from considering the way other states perceive and respond to the problem in Michoacan, the presence of non-state actors also needs to be highlighted. One of the ways NGOs do their role is through the method of naming and shaming (Donnelly, 2014). In this case, the NGOs may highlight Mexico's institutional ineptness in facing the cartel's menace to provide security for its own people. Hence, if no concrete steps are taken, the current insecurity in Michoacan may precipitate negative responses from the international community.

The available means for the government to deal with the threat

The present negative impacts and future exacerbation of the issue are more than enough reasons to consider it as a national security issue, albeit from a non-traditional threat. However, to better mobilize the effort and resources to confront the problem, the government needs to securitize the issue. Securitization or the act of securitizing an issue can be understood as a process where the power holder or elites declare a certain issue to be a security one, which in turn would give the power holder exclusive or exceptional power over its handling (Wæver, 1998). It is from such speech acts or securitization that the cartel's threat in Michoacan can further be legitimized. Such legitimation is important to justify, especially to the public, the measures that the government would be taking in response to the problem in Michoacan.

The components in the process of securitization or speech act done by the government are as follows, the securitizing actor, the referent subject, the referent object, the audience along with the context and the adoption of distinctive policies (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016). In the securitization of the Michoacan issue, the securitizing actor would be the Mexican government, the referent object being the avocado production in Michoacan along with the many people involved, the referent subject being the cartels

and the Mexican public as the audience in the securitization process. The context and the adoption of distinctive policies refer to the measures or policies taken by the Mexican government, especially whether or not it is exceptional. Following the speech act done by the government, it is also important for them to gain good acceptance or even support from the public.

Cartels and the problems they bring along are no strangers in the minds of the Mexican public. In fact, there have been many outcries for the government to take the necessary measures in responding to the cartel threat. With that state of the problem and perception, a new rapprochement in confronting the issue would be something the public would welcome. Putting the people's perception aside, Michoacan is also an important piece in the securitization scheme. Being the national heartland for avocado production responsible for the state's avocado export to the United States, Michoacan is indeed an important region for Mexico's national economy (Descalcota, 2023).

As elaborated before, the insecurity present in the region's avocado production is inseparable from the other security issues also caused by the cartels, notably human security suffered by the countless people involved in the thriving industry. Hence, with the clashing interest between the government and the cartels that seek to control the lucrative avocado industry, it should be rational for the government to mobilize the necessary resources and policies that have been made viable through the aforementioned securitization. The domestic mobilization of effort and resources is not the only course of action the government can resort to. In this case, they can also seek help from abroad, especially from other international actors that have maintained interdependence, especially in the avocado matter, with Mexico.

Apart from domestic measures that can be taken, Mexico can also seek assistance from other countries as well. One of the countries fit for this occasion would be the United States. The United States has been one of the countries in the Western Hemisphere that has close ties with Mexico. The United States and Mexico have been involved in numerous agreements, one of which is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which now has been taken over by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) since 2020. With the huge push for free trade among the two countries, bilateral trade has remained strong among them. One of the Mexican commodities with high demand in the US is avocados, which are mainly produced in Michoacan, Mexico.

Avocados from Michoacan take an important position in the entire scheme of US-Mexico fruit trade and specifically avocado supply as in 2021, more than 90% of them were imported from there. Adding to that, avocado has also been the commodity responsible for vast national economic contribution and opening up countless jobs in both the United States and Mexico (Avocado Institute, 2022). Considering that, the avocado trade between Mexico and the United States has been another area of economic cooperation that promotes economic growth. On a side note, the US has also been assisting Mexico in dealing with the cartels, especially in their illicit drug activities. A notable example of this would be the Merida Initiative that was made back in 2007 following Mexico's war on drugs. Under the initiative, the US would be providing funds to Mexican Security Forces so they can better confront the cartels (Hunt, 2021). With that

laid out, it should be reasonable for Mexico to seek assistance or support from the United States.

Moreover, in the prior suspension of Avocado import from Michoacan, the US has been very active in assisting Mexico to deal with the issue that eventually resulted in the lifting of the suspension. Following the announcement of the suspension, the US did not leave Mexico to deal with the problem alone, rather the US actively assisted Mexico through enacting several safety measures (Lucas, 2022). Mexico could utilize or align its interest with that of the US to take effective measures in dealing with the cartels of Michoacan.

The alignment of interests is possible considering that both states would benefit from stability and security over Michoacan. Mexico would welcome assistance to tackle the cartels that have been meddling with security in Michoacan and its avocado production. On the other hand, the US has interest in maintaining a stable supply chain of avocado from Michoacan (Martinez, 2022). It is also important to note the central spot avocado has in the US, especially in events like the Super Bowl that would require a huge supply of avocado. In that regard, the elimination of the cartels would greatly benefit that end. The United States and Mexico have many fields to work on. One notable field is the Mexican authority capacity building through the provision of training and equipment (Ellis, 2020). Many resources would need to be poured, for both the United States and Mexico, to deal with the problem. But to save what is at stake, the interdependence between the two countries, again it should be at the interest of both parties.

CONCLUSION

Amidst the instability and insecurity that riddle the Michoacan avocado production, the article surmises how the Mexican cartels pose a dire threat to said referent object. Aside from that, their iron grip over the avocado production entails numerous violent ways that affect the income along with the stability of the avocado production. The driving force behind the Mexican cartels' drive to control avocado productions can be pointed to domestic political developments that motivated them to diversify their portfolio and the exponential growth of the avocado industry. Moreover, if the governments do not take any decisive measures, the cartels could further undermine both Michoacan avocado production and Mexico's security as a whole. The cartels could do so through deteriorating Mexico's national institution which in turn would prolong the insecurity suffered by those involved in Michoacan avocado production. In addition, it could also bring severe economic repercussions as it may undermine Michoacan avocado production and how such conditions would invite international backlash as previously done by the US. Despite the bleak prospects the cartels bring forth over the horizon, the government can resort to numerous measures to take care of the issue. The measures range from domestic ones like a proper securitization of the issue to international ones like cooperating or enhancing existing cooperation with other states like the US. Later down the road, other researchers can spearhead research over other areas of this research. For example, future research can be done to better project or understand whether or not the iron grip the cartels have over Mexico's avocado production can become a future flashpoint for the US-Mexico relations or even the Western hemisphere's regional security complex. Such a topic is highlighted given the strong interconnectedness that

characterizes the international system along with the strong economic ties, which also encompass the avocados from Mexico, in the Western Hemisphere.

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