



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

U.S. and Colombia: A Growing Military Intervention?

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Colombia is one of the closest friends of American foreign policy. A country of 44 million, Colombia has been fighting for years against two scourges that have turned into primordial interests for the U.S.: drug trafficking and terrorism.

For nearly a decade, the U.S. has supported the Colombian government in this battle with a \$6 billion package of financial aid known as Plan Colombia: a counternarcotics strategy that has turned into a counterinsurgency one.

The results are mixed: The guerrilla groups are undermined, but the growth of the illicit drug market shows that the policy has not succeeded. The aerial spraying, has not only caused the displacement of peasants, but also the appearance of coca crops in other parts of the country. Because of drug trafficking, the income of armed groups is still a strong fuel for the conflict. Although there is a decrease in the number of combatants, military assistance is not providing solution to the war in Colombia.

“La Violencia”

Colombia’s armed conflict is not only the oldest one in the Western Hemisphere—60 years since the beginning of “La violencia”—but also the one that has produced one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world.¹

The war has contributed three armed groups to the List of Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations issued by the U.S. Department of State: FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), ELN (Liberation National Army), and the demobilized AUC (United Self-Defense forces of Colombia).

FARC, the oldest guerrilla force on the continent, was created in 1964 based on Marxist-Leninist doctrine. They believed in a revolutionary movement that could change the social and economic policies that were affecting the poor rural classes. Nowadays, with an ideology totally perverted by the drug trafficking and kidnapping industry, its popular

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support has diminished as has the number of its combatants. Due to a continuous confrontation with the military, they have lost 8,000 fighters in the past four years, according to official sources.

This reversal of fortune began in 2002, when President Alvaro Uribe Vélez, now in his second term, came to power. His “Democratic Security” policy has a strong military component, which has caused a huge setback to the activities of the guerrillas in the main cities and highways. The conflict moved to the stateless rural areas and the borders, far from public opinion and the mainstream media’s radar.

Despite the spectacular “Operacion Jaque,”² a rescue of 15 hostages held by the FARC (among them Ingrid Betancourt and the three North American defense contractors), the guerrillas still hold 750 kidnapped people. Beyond the government’s breakthroughs this year that also included the deaths of three of eight members of the Secretariat, the guerrillas still maintain a significant capacity to rejuvenate, recruit, and penetrate different institutions, mainly universities. The FARC remains in control of territories in the borders with Ecuador and Venezuela, where there are also significant coca crops.

Their presence in these neighboring countries has been a matter of diplomatic arguments, which in the Ecuadorian case resulted in the withdrawal of the ambassadors from Quito and Bogotá. With Venezuela, the removal of Hugo Chavez from his role of mediator to exchange hostages for guerrillas held in prisons provoked a deep bilateral crisis. The spread of left-wing governments in the region left Colombia in the position of defending U.S. interests and supporting its policies of intervention and cooperation in Latin America.³

For its part, the ELN, with origins back to 1965 and inspired by the Russian and Cuban revolutions, has been holding peace talks with the Colombian government in Havana since December 2005. The ELN is pushing for a National Convention that could include all sectors of the society in the construction of a new socialist model of government. The third round of talks is ending without a concrete agreement between the negotiators. In spite of a steep fall in the number of their combatants—nowadays estimated at 3000 armed fighters—the dialogue has not solved two substantial matters: a cease-fire and the liberation of some 240 hostages.

Finally, there is the AUC, a paramilitary faction formed in the 1980s. Initially, it was sponsored by livestock farmers and merchants frequently besieged by guerrillas. Rapidly, however, it began to operate death squads through a set of companies called “Convivir.” The Convivir were created in the northwestern department of Antioquia when Uribe was its governor. These links have been repeatedly used by his opponents to denounce him.

Some sectors in civil society, which include victims’ associations, complain about the relationship between Uribe and the right-wing AUC, pointing out that a complete demobilization of these groups had never occurred. Uribe initiated a peace process at the beginning of 2003 that has led over 30,000 former combatants to return to civilian life, but a large number of them were not part of the self-defense force.

For the time being, 14 commanders were extradited to the U.S. in 2008 to be prosecuted on drug trafficking charges. Critics of the extraditions, including José Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch, argue that the priority should have been prosecuting the paramilitaries for crimes against humanity under the Conventions on Human Rights signed by the Colombian state.

The big goal of the negotiations has been to put on trial the perpetrators of some of the bloodiest massacres in the country’s history through the creation of new legislation (a controversial Justice and Peace Law was heavily criticized for its slack penalties) that allowed victims to find truth, justice, and reparation. As in every conflict resolution—the South African peace process is a good example—these three components are the most important issues but also the hardest to achieve, considering the fact that the paramilitary phenomenon infiltrated the state so deeply: until October 2008 there were 65 congressmen in jail, accused of using paramilitaries in their regions in order to gain votes. The Supreme Court is pursuing ongoing investiga-

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tions into this case known as “Parapolítica.” But what is more worrying is that the main structures of the self-defense forces remain, now engaged with new groups called “Águilas Negras,” a new generation of paramilitaries.⁴

Drugs: Fuel of the Conflict

Besides other well-known exports like coffee and flowers, coca crops grow abundantly in rural Colombia, feeding drug trafficking and the conflict. The South American country is the owner of 60 percent of the world’s farming of coca leaves: 99,000 hectares that annually produce near 800 tons of cocaine. It is followed by Peru, with near 50,000 hectares, and Bolivia, with 28,900 hectares. As the United States is the world’s biggest cocaine consumer, it is not surprising that 90 percent of cocaine consumed here comes from Colombia. Additionally, according to the 2008 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Colombia is the leading supplier of heroin to the eastern United States.

The armed groups are fully engaged in the trade through cultivation and taxation; profits are between \$3 billion and \$4 billion dollars per year. These numbers represent just 10 percent of the profits, which means that 90 percent remains in the U.S.⁵ The social context, however, shows the weakest part of the chain to be the low-paid peasants called “raspachines” (the name refers to rasp-ing or scraping the coca leaf), who are also the most persecuted.

Although some capos of the old cartels are in jail or dead, the organizations have been evolving so fast that intelligence agencies (U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, Interpol) talk about a new generation of “baby cartels.” Without a visible leader such as Pablo Escobar or Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, the fight against drugs is focused on dismantling small organizations, which have served to divert the attention from the new barons hidden behind the armed groups. The extraditions mentioned above exemplified clearly these ties.

What has been the role of the U.S. in all these complex relations involving drugs, war, foreign policy, and a strong commitment with the Colombian democratic governments to avoid a failed state?⁶

In the early Cold War period, there was a growing concern in the U.S. about communist infiltration in Colombia, represented by the incipient guerrillas. Thus, Washington developed a counterinsurgency strategy in the country: foreign direct investment, assistance near the Panama Canal Zone, manuals to prevent subversion, clandestine training in resistance operations for select civilian and military personnel, and the foundation of a ranger school. Beginning in the 1950s, U.S. policy gradually took the form of a covert interventionism.⁷

The National Security Doctrine was taught subsequently by the American military to their fellows in Colombia. “Winning hearts and minds,” a famous strategy used during the counterinsurgency campaigns of the Vietnam War, was incorporated in the psychological operations that Colombian officers began in the 1990s, after receiving training in the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of Americas). More than 10,000 Colombians attended this school.⁸

Colombia reciprocated by providing a battalion to fight alongside the United States during the Korean War, the only Latin American country to do so. Half a century later, the Uribe administration was the only one in South America to support the invasion of Iraq.

The high point of this relationship occurred in 1999, when Presidents Bill Clinton and Andrés Pastrana signed Plan Colombia: an unprecedented North American financial aid to a South American country. From 2000 to 2008, Congress has provided more than \$6 billion to support the fight against drugs and terrorism in Colombia, making the country the largest non-Middle Eastern recipient of U.S. military assistance. Since 2002, the State Department has been granted expanded authority to use counter-narcotics funds in an additional counterinsurgency campaign.

A Plan for War

The official Defense Department document of Plan Colombia contemplates 10 strategies to strengthen democratic institutions and support the peace process:

- Generation of employment
- Return to viability on financial international markets
- Modernization of the armed forces
- Strengthening of justice
- Protection of human rights
- Fight against drugs
- Alternative development to illicit crops
- Social participation in supporting the fight against corruption and against armed illegal groups
- Human development that guarantees health and education
- Shared responsibility and integrated action to address the drug problem

Undoubtedly, the ambitious scope of what should be an integrated strategy of assistance has been centered in the military component. That is why the second phase of the plan 2007-2013, called “Strengthening the Strategy of Democracy and Social Development,” sets up the objective in the social recovery of those territories in the midst of the conflict through civil-military actions. That is, to send to remote villages in the countryside health brigades and teachers, and a stronger presence of the justice system.

At the beginning of the plan, three American military bases were created in Colombian territory: Tres Esquinas, Caquetá; Laramia, Caquetá, and Villavicencio, Meta. In the latter, aviation combat units are concentrated. According to the Pentagon, there are around 1,400 American civil servants supporting the Plan, and they are immune to criminal prosecution owing to an agreement between the American and Colombian governments.

Their presence has been primarily in two departments. In Putumayo, located in the southwest along the border with Ecuador and Peru, they support the operations of an Army Counter-Narcotics Brigade, a Navy Riverine Brigade and the Army’s 24th Brigade. The second one is Arauca, in the northeast along the border with Venezuela, where they protect the 500-mile Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline, a permanent target of dynamite

attacks by armed groups. The pipeline is 44 percent owned by the American company Occidental Petroleum and transports 96,000 barrels per day. The Army's 18th Brigade is in charge of the area.

In both provinces, there is a strong presence of left-wing and right-wing factions of the conflict, which fight bitterly for control of significant amounts of coca crops. Because of drug trafficking, the violence there has not changed dramatically.

Supporters of the current U.S. policy towards Colombia stress the improvement in the security conditions through the weakening of the guerrillas. Critics consider that, in spite of the victories, human rights have not been protected, alternative crop cultivation is not working, and the illicit drugs are still easily available in the market for American youth.

This is the mainstream view of the policy outcome: Plan Colombia has been effective for the counterinsurgency strategy but extremely poor for the counternarcotics goals. In other words: it has benefited Colombia in its fight against terrorism, but it has not made the U.S. win the fight against illicit drugs.

Numbers related to production, supply and demand are frequently contradictory and consistently worrying. The aerial herbicide spraying has not diminished the crops (peasants continue planting coca in regions where the drug economy is hard to replace and there is little state control). On the contrary, the fumigation has contributed to spread the cultivation into new rural areas, accompanied by violence and corruption. Additionally, environmentalists have denounced adverse effects on human health caused by the exposure to the chemical Glyphosate.

There was a recent debate about the numbers. While the Office of National Drug Control Policy reported a reduction in Colombia's coca production potential, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime found through the GPS system that, although the total number of hectares cultivated is down, the coca planted per hectare increased by 27 percent in 2007.⁹

In a more optimistic view, the U.S. drug czar John Walters said during a visit to Colombia that the pressure provoked by the fumigation, the manual eradication, and the seizures has made the cultivable areas less productive and cocaine less pure.

But there is also the third component of the controversy: consumption. Detractors of the "punishment policies" applied to the producing countries maintain that the fight against drugs should primarily address the demand. There should be an improvement in educational policies against drug abuse and in health treatment for addicts. Moreover, American big traffickers should be punished through enforcement of laws against corruption and organized crime.

The debate is not over and certainly will take place again in 2009, during the UN General Assembly Special Session on Illicit Drugs, where the conclusions of the previous Antidrug World Summit, Vienna: Ten Years Later, will be discussed. Probably, U.S. foreign policy failure in Colombia will again be a case study.

Under the New Administration

Would a new U.S. government reexamine this policy?

One evident conclusion about this strong relationship of allies is that U.S. policy in Colombia has been based on a firm belief in the importance of the U.S. role as a democracy-maker. It is certainly a Wilsonian—and more recently, a Republican—idea, a model of indirect intervention that grows year after year, motivated by the geopolitical importance of the country. On one hand, there is an intervention similar to the one in El Salvador, with weapons, training, military assistance, and information. On the other hand, there is an intervention model post 9/11, in which the local Colombian problems are shown as global ones, in order to gain the pressure and support of other countries in the fight.

The inclusion of FARC, ELN, and AUC in the European Union list of terrorist organizations, the red circular letters of Interpol, the goods interdiction, the prosecution of the "diplomats" of armed groups, and the freezing of bank accounts are goals achieved by this international cooperation.

Are all of these mainly Republican ideas? It is true that Plan Colombia began under a Democratic government. But what seems to be a bipartisan policy has changed precisely because of the worsening of the war. The Leahy amendment, which denies funds to any security force that violate human rights, has been recently brought up in political debates, mainly by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The concerns about the assassinations of union leaders and their labor rights surprisingly stole a minute of the last debate between presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama. While the former travelled to Colombia in July, the same week when the "Operación Jaque" was done, and supported the approval of the Free Trade Agreement, the current president stands from the point of view of his party—respect for human rights before any treaty.

A unanimous perception among the Colombian and North American policy makers is the lack of constructive relations between Uribe and the Democratic Party. Because of the close friendship Uribe built with Bush, the Colombian president ignored the possibility of a future administration without the Republicans. The new government led by a Democrat with little experience in Latin America, but whose party has emphasized its concern about human and labor rights in the country, would likely pursue new policies (as well as continuities) in the relationship with Colombia.

The FY2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act is a signal of the change: it attempted to raise the level of U.S. funding provided for economic and social aid closer to that provided for security-related programs.¹⁰ Today of every 100 dollars of the American cooperation, 75 are for the military component. Surely, this policy would be changed under Barack Obama.

Although the House has expressed the importance of continuing U.S. assistance to Colombia, there are several reasons that show the beginning of the aid decrease.

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@mit.edu, 617.253.1965)

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First, U.S. ambassador to Bogota, William Brownfield, recently recognized that the financial crisis will pressure American lawmakers to cut the multibillion dollar budget. "It is not an elimination of our aid, but a gradual reduction," he told to journalists.

Second, an October U.S. congressional report commissioned by Vice-President-elect Joseph Biden, concludes—no surprise—that Plan Colombia's herbicidal campaign has not reached its intended goal of halving coca crops.

Third, the recent involvement of Colombian Army units in extrajudicial killings provoked the U.S. to suspend military aid to at least three of them. The case in which 11 innocent civilians were illegally executed by the army in order to show them as combatants also caused the firing of 27 army officers accused of negligence or direct involvement in the slayings.

Human rights violations make it more unsustainable for the new Democratic government to support a military solution that has been attempted for decades without success. The Uribe government has won some battles in the war. But while drug trafficking keeps the groups alive, there is no possibility of a happy end. Fumigation is a wrong policy and there seems to be a consensus on this issue even in the public opinion. (A recent poll of American voters by Zogby/Inter-American Dialogue found that 76 percent thinks that the war against drugs does not work.)

Given the unavoidable intervention by the U.S. in Colombia, it could be more worthwhile to direct its efforts towards a future peace agreement. That is, strengthen the other nine goals of Plan Colombia designed to improve the social conditions in the country's most vulnerable areas. Is it the time for peace-building? Not yet. But it is an opportunity to invest billions of dollars in the solution of the deeper problems that feed the war.

footnotes

1 UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports since 2004 have emphasized that the humanitarian crisis in Colombia is only surpassed by the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. The numbers of IDPs has been always object of controversy; while the NGO Codhes estimates that there are approximately 4 millions of displaced people, the government admits about 2.6 million persons who were forced to leave their homes.

2 The Colombian government claims the absolute employment of national agents in the operation, but a book recently published reveals the participation of at least 1000 Americans including soldiers, doctors and engineers. See DUDLEY, Steven. *Operación Jaque, secretos no revelados*, Ed. Oveja Negra. Colombia October 2008.

3 *U.S. Southern Command Strategy 2016 Partnership for the Americas* details a strategic and ambitious projection of the Defense Department in the region for the following eight years, without considering any multilateral role. Online: <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/files/0U101175252190.pdf>.

4 Several NGOs have documented on the rearmament of these groups and the government recently recognized the appearance of new bands. Nevertheless, the statistics delivered for each agency range between 3,000 and 9,000 men. See Leonardo Perafán Gonzalez, "Nuevos grupos paramilitares: una realidad," *Corporación Viva la Ciudadanía*, December 2007.

5 A detailed explanation of these numbers is in "ATS Global Assessment; Coca Cultivation in the Andean Region 2008," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

6 Colombia has not been included in the list of "Failed States," due to the paradoxical solidity of its democratic institutions. Nevertheless some authors have used concepts as "quasi-state," "narcodemocracy," and "state in route of collapse," maintaining on one hand the fact that the weapons monopoly is not in the state, and, on the other hand that there are some territories of the country controlled by the subversives. See among others, Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, "Saving Failed States," *Foreign Policy*, No. 89 (Verano 1992-1993); William Zartman; "Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (August 1996); Robert I. Rotberg, "The new nature of nation-state failure," *The Washington Quarterly*, 25(3) (Summer 2002).

7 An analysis of U.S. policy toward Colombia both during and after the Cold war period in: Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

8 Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead. The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (University of California Press, 2007).

9 UN World Drug Report 2007. On line: http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/wdr07/WDR_2007.pdf.

10 Colleen W. Cook and Clare Seelke, *Colombia: Issues for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, September 2008).



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