

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**MORPHING WAR: COUNTER-NARCOTICS, COUNTER-INSURGENCY, AND
COUNTER-TERRORISM DOCTRINE IN COLOMBIA**

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“The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” Carl von Clausewitz,

Introduction

Because of the Global War on Terror, US policy in Colombia recently abruptly changed from a strict focus on controlling the flow of drugs to the US to a broader policy of support for Colombia’s battles with insurgent and paramilitary forces. Although we have expanded US counter-insurgency aid and training to the military, we have misunderstood the kind of war and the doctrine and tactics we need to use. The correct tactics are more anti-terrorist and anti-bandit than anti-revolutionary. Civilian insecurity and lack of territorial control demand more assistance to the police, rather than more assistance to the military. This will be more effective in Colombia, and better for maintaining long term support from the US.

FARC: Predators, Not Proletariat

Years of assistance and pressure from the US and other Western countries to improve counter-narcotics efforts and stop the flow of drugs out of Colombia has not improved the situation for the average Colombian.

Infamous drug lords are no longer the main threat, but ample funding from violent crime and drug smuggling made guerrillas independent of outside financing or internal contributions to where they became a serious threat to the state in the late 1990’s.

Two left wing groups started as peasant movements. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC – approx. 18,000 men) grew substantially in the last 10 years, as has the

National Liberation Army (4,000). The most rapidly growing force, reports Janes' *Sentinel Security Assessment*, is the right wing paramilitary association United Self Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC- 18,000). The AUC grew up as civil defense militias to protect cattle farmers from guerrilla rustling. It was only a few hundred men 10 years ago. It now protects coca fields and laboratories, despite protestations of piety.

While guerrillas started in 1964 with ideological support from Cuba, they are no longer truly Marxist and they are no longer popular, even in the rural areas. Since losing all vestiges of outside support 15 years ago, they have resorted to various predatory methods of financing, according to Alfredo Rangel in the *Journal of International Affairs*. They are involved with extortion of large and small businesses and ranchers selling protection against destruction or kidnapping (with about 3,500 kidnappings, Colombia accounted for around 75 percent of ALL kidnappings in the world in 2002 reports the US Department of State).

In the last 10 years, guerrillas took the role of drug supplier and facilitator. The FARC receives at least \$470 million dollars a year in revenues from taxes on illicit growers, profits from drug labs making cocaine, or in protection payments for shipments in transit to other countries.

To handle all this business each FARC front (of about 100 men) must be self-supporting and send back funds regularly to the headquarters. Those who do not, lose their positions. If there are accusations of corruption, they lose their lives, according to news reports. Forcible recruitment is common, especially of children under 16 years old who are living in the rural areas controlled by guerrillas. Other volunteers join because of the promised regular paycheck. This cutthroat capitalism erases any vestige of Marxist Leninist "popular revolution" thought

from the actions of any front commander, and makes the FARC increasingly a predator on the proletariat as well as upper classes.

Guerrillas are the major threat, but not the only one. Right wing groups have a grudging respect and support, especially in the rural areas, despite their horrific massacres of suspected guerrilla sympathizers and families (matched tit for tat by the guerrillas), but only because they provide protection from the even more predatory FARC. One view of the complicated Colombian reality suggests that after dismantling the guerrilla threat the paramilitary threat and presence will fade away. This is wishful thinking. Over time, the “paras” are developing their own reasons to remain in existence (drug money, a salary, or a simple lust for power) even if they do not pose the same threat to the average citizen now.

Counter-Narcotics Funds for a Virtual Counter-Insurgency?

President Alvaro Uribe elected in 2002 on a promise to prosecute the war, committed to spend 4-6% of GDP on defense into the indefinite future. In other words, Colombia is beginning to take a serious look at the insurgency issue and confront the budgetary realities of a civil war. This willingness to pay a fair share of the costs of a military expansion made it much easier for US supporters to urge a change to a broader definition of US national interests in support of counterinsurgency versus a more narrowly self serving interest in merely stopping the flow of drugs to the US.

US policy in Colombia under the Clinton Administration was designed to go after drug traffickers while steering away from support for the military in its counter-insurgency effort. This reflected the generally bad human rights reputation of military units and their cooperation with vicious paramilitary forces.

As the guerrillas became stronger and more entwined with drug trafficking, the Armed Forces became interested in tapping into US funds for counter-narcotics training and equipment. This was just as the US Congress became more willing to consider lifting certain restrictions on support to the military. Starting with two “anti-drug brigades” that were dedicated solely to anti-narcotics missions (search and destroy, support for police units, clearing guerrillas from areas for spray operations and rural development operations), the Army received training from US Special Forces. Best of all, Congress funded 72 Blackhawk and Huey helicopters. However, this counter-narcotics support was not enough for a nationwide counter-insurgency campaign. Lobbying continued by Colombia (with support from some Congress members), to get more funds with fewer restrictions. Support grew for the idea that a narrow drug enforcement approach was not dealing with the real issue – the attack on the state by destabilizing armed forces. A state under attack on so many fronts was naturally going to be a good place for other criminal activities such as drug cultivation or smuggling.

The Tipping Point: Counter-Terror Support for Counter-Insurgency Operations

After the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the requests for more funding and a focus on counter-insurgency quickly converted into an ostensible “counter-terror” requirement supported by the Bush Administration. The FARC obligingly and indiscriminately blew up car, house, mule, and even bike bombs in various cities, making President Uribe’s case for him. Congress did not need much urging, and on March 21, 2002, lifted the restrictions confining expenditures to drug enforcement. This allowed the Armed Forces to use the “anti-drug brigades” and Blackhawks anywhere in the country, against narcotics trafficking and against guerrillas. But no new funds were voted, setting up a “new unfunded mandate” that had

to be met by drawing down on the drug enforcement efforts of the police, explained former Ambassador to Colombia, Anne Patterson, in October, 2003.

(In)Security and the State

The guerrillas have not survived because they are popular, strong, smart, and tough, but rather because the Colombian state has allowed them to continue as pseudo-Marxist bandits. When the Army defeated the guerrillas in the mountains in the early 60's, the remnants moved deeper into the jungles. For many years, Colombia wrote off its rural hinterlands, true frontier areas where settlers arrived with nothing and began to farm. Law and order, much less health care and services, never followed the settlers. As one local expert commentator, Alfredo Rangel, notes "in reality, part of the guerrilla's success, entrenchment, and longevity is attributable to its having been the first to build finished, politically and administratively delineated spaces in these territories." Over time, they rebuilt with the aid of drugs, extortion, and kidnapping. Reliable estimates show guerrilla presence in up to 600 of 1075 municipalities (i.e. counties) in the country, according to an Inter American Development Bank report in 2000. A conservative estimate suggests 200 of those 600 are sufficiently dominated that guerrillas influence contracts provided by the town and skim 5-10 percent to fund guerilla operations – arguably an adequate measure of presence and control, Rangel adds. Under threat from the FARC, half the elected mayors in Colombia were forced to resign or govern from neighboring departmental capitals, rather than live in their own town.

At this point, the Army has approximately 55,000 professional soldiers (volunteers) and 100,000 regular soldiers (draftees). At the same time, police went from 79,000 professional police to 100,000 total by the end of 2003. This is not enough force to win a counterinsurgency

war using the standard counterinsurgency doctrine of a 10 to 1 advantage required to prevail over the 20-25,000 guerrillas and the 18,000 paramilitaries. A fair assumption is that the military will need double the present professional forces. It will also need equipment. Some foresee a force of 400 helicopters, plus other aircraft, as well as other transport, Marcella says. This tracks with the US experience in El Salvador, a country the size of a county in Texas, which had 60 US-donated Huey helicopters by the end of the war. (Colombia is five times Montana's size.) On the positive side, the Uribe administration is also creating a national locally based militia, a network of informants, and lightly armed police counterinsurgency units to support the Army.

Right War, Wrong Tactics?

For the US, the goals of the new Uribe Administration strategy are appropriate, and fit well with US long-term interests in peace and stability as well as the goal to control the flow of drugs to the US. However, is increased spending and manpower going to be efficient and effective in the long term? A larger, better equipped and trained Colombian military is the obvious step and one that our military and special forces advisors have stressed during the last several years, despite lack of US funding to help and encourage reforms. The Army can certainly use assistance and training; even critics agree that the Army is "resource-strapped" and note the need for improved security

However, the means selected (building the military) and the ways (mobility, small units, and firepower) rely heavily on an analysis of the counterinsurgency environment that assumes that the solution is a military "force on force" situation. The Colombian Army may become a better hammer, but Colombia may not be a nail.

As guerrilla theory expert Andrew J. Joes put it in *Saving Democracy*, “Counterinsurgency is not a subset of conventional war. In an insurgency Clausewitz’s center of gravity is the civilian population...in the loyalty or at least secure control of the population.”

Building a better army may be what the US knows how to do, for which we have planned, trained and have US advisors available. However, it may not attack the real threat – pervasive criminal and terrorist insecurity for the general population. Columbia’s insurgency is not a classic revolutionary insurgency any longer. It is closer to banditry or even more like a mafia, with low support from the population. While there was a time a few years back when the FARC was able to mass forces and successfully conduct attacks on battalion sized military units, it was more due to the low training, poor leadership and poor Armed Forces tactics rather than FARC skill and underground support network.

A truly dedicated revolutionary army, ala the FMLN in El Salvador, is more concerned with becoming unpopular with its supporters, and even risks greater fighter casualties to avoid collateral damage. The FARC guerrillas, for their part, demonstrate an unwillingness to suffer casualties, preferring stand off weapons that cause indiscriminate damage (homemade gas pipe bombs), possibly because too many casualties in a virtually mercenary force make you very unpopular with the troops.

Even with manpower and equipment limits “the newly invigorated armed forces have driven the guerrillas back into their mountain and jungle strongholds. Instead of concentrating many hundreds of guerrillas for attacks, the FARC have broken down into smaller groups again...they no longer take on security forces directly, but concentrate on destroying infrastructure,” *Janes Assessment* reports.

This war requires a different approach. “The government response to an insurgency should take as its fundamental assumption that the true nature of the threat lies in the insurgent’s political potential rather than his military power, although the latter may appear more worrying in the short term,” writes British General Gavin Bullock. He says, “Commanders should seek ‘soft’ methods of destroying the enemy; by arrest, physical isolation, or subversion, for example. The use of minimum force necessary is a well proven counterinsurgency lesson.”

Support Your Local Police

Interestingly, large guerrilla attacks on much smaller police units in some towns were never as successful as attacks against the Army. Although not as well armed, police are all volunteers, have a lifetime career path, and are high school graduates. Usually untrained in small unit military tactics, they are generally better led. As one observer noted, “With stronger ties and support of the civilian population, the police often would be warned of attack, and could prepare their defense, or even be protected by rings of grateful civilians,” notes US Embassy Police Advisor Paul Mahlsted. Even when overwhelmed by superior numbers, there are few cases where police units surrendered before firing their last bullet.

The situation appears to be reverting to the early stages of an insurgency, often characterized by terrorist acts, attacks on infrastructure, and always the criminal attacks on individuals. It calls for a different and non-military approach.

Colombia needs a sharp increase in police forces to provide the force structure needed for a terrorist and criminal threat. We have not done much in this arena. Police support by the US in the past has been limited to counternarcotics assistance for elite counter narcotics units and some work with other specialized units. Only 4,000 police are in counternarcotics units receiving US

support. The vast majority of police in the rural areas have received little assistance. Estimated US financial and training and equipment support in 2004 is dedicated half to the Army (\$158 million of which \$147 million alone is going to support US supplied helicopters), and half to the police (\$147 million). Of the police amount, \$120 million is dedicated to counternarcotics efforts, and \$13 million is for rebuilding secure rural police posts to allow police to return to 160 towns.

Police are at least as undermanned as the military. Most of the 100,000-man police force is dedicated to other duties typical for normal police units in any country, even while simultaneously defending against guerrilla attacks and providing security to government officials. The government partially recognizes the problem. Police expect as much as a 25% increase in staff as part of the Uribe policy. That is probably not enough in a country with high general crime rates and the highest homicide rate in the world. The homicide rate for Colombia is .77 per 1000 citizens, compared to South Africa at number 2 with .5 per 1000, or the US, .05 per 1000.

The national ratio of police to civilians is 2.22 to 1000 citizens. By comparison, this puts it a bit below average in a survey of 48 nations by the UN, virtually all of which do not have threats to civil security faced by Colombia. Hong Kong has 4.53 police officers per 1000 residents, as an example, and Portugal has 4.87. Countries with the same level of per capita income as Colombia, such as Thailand (3.46), South Africa (2.81) Slovakia (3.73), demonstrate that an increase in the Colombian police force of 50 to 100 percent is justifiable. This would still leave the total number of police (200,000) at below 4.5 per 1000.

This essentially civilian effort would have more impact on the image of state weakness or strength than increasing the military. Sheer numbers are not the whole solution of course,

training, equipping and supporting would be a continuing budget and quality control issue, but the average police unit certainly uses less equipment and spends more time in the field than the average military air mobile brigade. Colombian police are well-trained and modern in approach by Latin American standards, an observation implicitly supported by human rights activists, who, while they complain about individual rights violations by the police in Colombia, do not level the “wholesale” arguments that they focus on the military.

There are several logical advantages to relying on police to carry more of the counterinsurgency load. Police units are more attuned to working with the community, and collecting intelligence directly from the community. Most military units remain more isolated by the very nature of their training and culture, as well as their fewer but larger bases outside of town. In addition, the public sees the average Colombian policeman as a more effective public servant. The policeman is supposed to be talking to the public as part of his position, making establishing contacts much easier. He (or she - female police officers are often a plus) is better accepted because he/she is a direct service provider – resolving local disputes, catching dogs, issuing documents, directing traffic, etc. This contact is the essence of counter-insurgency political work, if done well and respectfully by the officers. The police have a reputation for this; the Army will have to work to establish it.

Reinforcing the police will serve several ends. Stronger and more numerous police units will deny access to the guerrillas in the areas where they work, providing the “clear and hold strategy” that is needed in a guerrilla war, following behind the Army in the most conflictive zones, but also entering and occupying the “reinforced police stations” that are part of the present expansion concept. At the same time, they provide a direct personal service to the citizens in those towns, the ability to control crime and enforce contracts, something lacking in many parts

of the “Wild West” areas of Colombia. (Hundreds of hamlets have never had police and want them.)

It is not too early to start looking at the aftermath of victory – ensuring a better peace. Experience in Central America, Bosnia, Kosovo and Africa has shown that the follow-on to peace agreements is usually an upsurge in chaos and violent armed crime due to demobilization of both the guerrillas and the soldiers. If there is not a negotiated solution and a quick clean end, the war will wind down in a protracted manner, which means that the need for small local police-type forces will be even more necessary. Unlike the Army, when the war is over the police will still have an enlarged role to fill in society.

This approach benefits the Colombian military also. The US military deployed in several countries (Bosnia, Kosovo) where an exit strategy had to be delayed while a respectable local civilian security force was constructed. We should help the Colombian military avoid doing tasks for which they did not train and are not equipped. This will avoid human rights scandals as well.

Admittedly, this reorientation of emphasis from military to police deliberately ignores the strong arguments that greater economic assistance by the US and better social programs by the Colombian government builds credibility and support among the population. While true, development alone will not definitively squash the guerrillas.

In the same way, justice sector reforms are important to overall victory as well – arrests not followed with convictions can lead to extra-judicial violence, and do not stop the guerrillas. However, to “fight” a low scale terrorist/criminal war you need a grassroots response that best comes from local law enforcement.

Using the police offers a “two-for-one” concept – better civil defense AND better crime control leads to more support for the government and makes it even easier to take on the guerrillas. Dedicated and adequate police forces are a better method than the military alone for supporting local state services and building a competent respected state structure. We need to shift our training and resources to where they will do the most good in a terrorist environment.

Some observers think the US is more comfortable with providing trainers for military purposes, and the military are more comfortable looking at clean military “force on force” issues, rather than messy political ones, declares Michael McClintock in his 1992 book on *US Guerrilla Warfare*. We, and the Colombians, need to avoid the comfortable typical military to military answer in counterinsurgency – low tech and personal is a better way to solve the insecurity problem. Neglecting to build up the police, diverting our funds to military counterinsurgency efforts, not looking at the long term needs of the country, not fixing the immediate problems of citizens in rural and urban areas – these problems will come back to haunt us unless we take steps to make sure we are not fighting the wrong war in Colombia.