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A Critique of Plan Colombia

By

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U.S. Department of State

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy or the Department of State.

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May 17, 2005

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Abstract

A strong and democratic Colombia is vitally important to U.S. national security. Colombia's future, however, remains in doubt. Colombia has been involved in a civil war since the 1960s with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). The United Self-defense Forces (AUC), a third group that operates outside of the law in Colombia, is opposed to the FARC and ELN. All three organizations turned to the drug trade in the 1990s in order to fund their movements, and have since strayed from their founding ideologies and have become criminal organizations that export cocaine and heroin to the United State and threaten to destabilize Latin America. In 1999, the Government of Colombia (GOC) developed Plan Colombia to revitalize its economy, bring an end to the FARC, ELN and AUC, and battle the drug trade. The U.S. Government has diplomatically and militarily supported the Plan since its inception and has provided billions of dollars in aid to the GOC. More can be done, however, on the military front. The U.S. military was initially only permitted to train the Colombian military in counter-narcotics operations against the FARC, ELN and AUC; however, Congress subsequently granted the U.S. military authority to also train the Colombians in counterinsurgency operations. U.S. military personnel are still not authorized to accompany their Colombian colleagues on operations. This is a mistake. This tactic worked for the U.S. military in El Salvador in the 1980s and would provide the U.S. military in Colombia with the flexibility to ensure that the Colombian military is operating correctly and appropriately in the field.

Introduction

A democratic and stable Colombia is vital to U.S. national interests in the Western Hemisphere. Unfortunately, the Colombian drug trade is responsible for thousands of deaths each year in the United State and threatens stability in Latin America.¹ “Colombia is the source of over 90 percent of the cocaine and 50 percent of the heroin entering the United State. It is also a leading user of precursor chemicals and the focus of significant money laundering activity.”² This is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Government of Colombia (GOC) was severely threatened by the powerful drug cartels that operated in the country and, at various times, seemed in danger of losing its authority to the men who oversaw these vast illegal empires. The GOC captured or killed the drug barons of the 1980s and 1990s, but the narcotics business was soon taken over by the country’s two Marxist guerilla movements, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN - National Liberation Army), and by the rightwing paramilitary movement, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC – United Self-defense Forces).³ Since 1999, the U.S. Government has been assisting the GOC in combating the narco-terrorists that operate in Colombia through its support of Plan Colombia.⁴

The U.S. Government is the largest supporter of Plan Colombia outside of Colombia and has contributed over 600 million U.S. dollars per year to the program. U.S. Government assistance also incorporates the direct involvement of many federal agencies, to include the Department of State (DOS), the Department of Defense (both military and civilian personnel), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Agency for International Development (AID). The majority of the U.S. Congress has also strongly supported the Plan

and has not wavered in providing the necessary funding for it.⁵ But questions have arisen among some members of Congress, non-governmental organizations and the American public whether large amounts of U.S. taxpayers' money is being spent properly and judiciously in Colombia. Is the U.S. Government's strategy in support of Plan Colombia working? And is it the best strategy to pursue? The answer to the first question is yes. And the answer to the second question is yes but with one proviso: expand the U.S. military's role.

The positive answers to the two questions above are controversial to some, but can be supported by identifying strategic and operational objectives and a broad operational center of gravity for the U.S. and Colombian governments for Plan Colombia. In general terms, the strategic objective for both countries is the establishment of a strong and stable democratic government in Colombia. There are two broad operational objectives: one, to defeat the FARC and the ELN, and to bring an end to the AUC; and two, to end the drug trade between Colombia and the United State. Continuing with this approach, the overriding center of gravity is the will of the Colombian and American people to support Plan Colombia. The critical capabilities needed for this center of gravity are the elements of the DIME analysis: D – diplomacy, I - information, M – military, E – economy, and one additional element, LE for law enforcement. Following the four stages of “DIME Plus One”, the critical vulnerabilities are as follows: popular support for the GOC; GOC respect for human rights; progress in the battle against the FARC, ELN and AUC; a strong and growing economy and progress in counter-narcotics operations. (Note: Critical requirements are not included in this analysis.) By applying the center of gravity theory it is clear that the United State should continue to support Plan Colombia and, as part of the Plan, the U.S. military should focus

primarily on assisting the Colombian military to defeat the FARC and the ELN and to dismantle the AUC.⁶ This does not mean that the U.S. Government should forget the narcotics traffickers while the U.S. military supports the Colombian military as it battles the FARC, ELN and AUC. Indeed, the narcotics problem in Colombia is much more complicated than bringing an end to these three movements, and it should be pursued primarily through the remaining elements of DIME and, most importantly, by law enforcement means. Defeating the FARC, ELN and AUC will contribute greatly to ending the drug trade in Colombia. In other words, bringing an end to the FARC, ELN and AUC, all of which dominate the narcotics trafficking business, will assist law enforcement in its fight against the Colombian narco-traffickers.

Although other nations support the U.S. Government's participation in Plan Colombia, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do not. Many NGOs follow Plan Colombia and keep an eye on both the U.S. Government's role and its conduct in Colombia. Opinion is divided among NGOs on the viability of the Plan. NGOs, of course, support an end to the fighting in Colombia and express a great concern for human rights there. Specifically, NGOs blame the Colombian Government for violating human rights and supporting the AUC and its crimes against the Colombian people. It should come as no surprise then that many NGOs believe that peace can only be brought to Colombia through reforming the judicial system, respecting human rights and improving the economy. Therefore, many NGOs are opposed to the U.S. military involvement in Colombia, and see it more as an aggravating factor than as part of a solution.⁷

Background

Plan Colombia was developed by the Government of Colombia in 1999 to meet the most pressing challenges it faced: "...promoting the peace process, combating the narcotics industry, reviving the Colombian economy, and strengthening the democratic pillar of Colombian society."⁸ Plan Colombia is a \$7.5 billion program of which the GOC pledged \$4 billion and asked the international community to provide the balance of \$3.5 billion. The U.S. Government agreed initially to provide \$1.3 billion to support Colombia's efforts and now provides over \$600 million per year to the Plan.⁹ Further, the United States also initially committed itself to primarily target narcotics trafficking and not to focus directly on the FARC, ELN and AUC. This approach was naïve and counterproductive.

The genesis of Colombia's present problems stems from the inequities that have existed there for decades between the ruling class and the poor. Moreover, the FARC and ELN, which appeared in the country in the 1960s as a result of the inadequate social conditions for the poor, and the AUC, which emerged as a force to fight the FARC and ELN, have compounded Colombia's problems. Indeed, these three groups filled the vacuum left by the major drug cartels that were defeated in the 1990s and now run the drug trade to fund their movements. Today, the FARC, ELN and AUC have strayed from their original ideologies and have basically evolved into criminal organizations.¹⁰

Provided below is a review of the "DIME Plus One" analysis as it relates to Plan Colombia.

D – Diplomacy

The diplomatic effort spearheaded by the U.S. Government in Plan Colombia has involved a wide spectrum of programs. In its most basic sense, or as viewed from a macro

perspective, President Bush has strongly supported the policies and programs of Colombia's president, Alvaro Uribe. As a result, the White House has been in favor of Plan Colombia, and the Congress has provided the funding to support the U.S. involvement.¹¹ Moreover, members of President Bush's cabinet have stepped out in front to lead the U.S. effort more forcefully. For example, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Bogotá from April 27 to 28 of this year, during which she praised the success of the Plan.¹²

On-the-ground diplomacy, or as viewed from a micro perspective, is being led by the American Embassy in Bogotá at a myriad of levels. Various DOS entities, plus other U.S. Government agencies located at the embassy, provide direct support to Plan Colombia, which can generally be divided between two areas: support for a democratic government in Colombia and support for peace negotiations.¹³

One of the basic tenets of a democracy is to establish a government that is not corrupt and which the people can trust; in other words, government has to be transparent. In Colombia this is being realized on several levels: The GOC has passed legislation that targets money laundering and the path of money corresponding with narcotics trafficking. Further, investigative teams have been created within the Office of the Prosecutor General to pursue allegations of corruption. Although corruption can be a problem at all levels, in Colombia it mostly strikes the outlying areas of the country. An Anti-Corruption Task Force Unit has been created to pursue public corruption allegations.¹⁴

Peace negotiations have been pursued by the GOC and continue to be a strategy supported through Plan Colombia. At various times, the GOC has approached the FARC, ELN and the AUC in an effort to bring an end to the fighting. The negotiations have been give-and-take. For example, the AUC has agreed to demobilize its fighters by December

2005, but the results thus far have not been entirely successful. Approximately 4,600 AUC fighters have given up arms out of a total of 20,000 combatants, as numbered by the AUC. The GOC, at various times, has seemed close to a similar agreement with the ELN but has yet to reach a deal. The FARC is a tougher nut to crack, although the GOC continues its efforts.^{15 16}

I – Information

It can be argued that information is the most important element of the DIME analysis. In other words, if a program's progress cannot be communicated to the people it is supposed to help then the chances of success only decrease. The U.S. Government and the GOC are not making this mistake with Plan Colombia. The DOS and U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) are trumpeting the successes of Plan Colombia with guarded optimism. The DOS and the American Embassy in Bogotá conduct public relations blitzes and regularly publish press releases about the Plan's progress and accomplishments. For example, a recent DOS press release lauds U.S. assistance with support for human rights and judicial reform, problems that have plagued the GOC for decades and gave strength to the FARC and ELN movements. This release notes that "Specific initiatives include protecting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with human rights...; strengthening human rights institutions...; establishing human rights units within the Colombian National Police (CNP) and the Colombian attorney general's office...; training judges and prosecutors...; and providing funding to train and support Colombian law enforcement personnel in anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, and anti-kidnapping measures."¹⁷ These advances are extremely important not only to the Colombian people but also to the region and the international community. SOUTHCOM is also actively advancing information that supports

the U.S. involvement in Plan Colombia. General James Hill, recently departed Commander, SOUTHCOM, has given speeches to interested groups in the United States on the progress the GOC is making and the assistance that the U.S. military is providing the Colombian military.¹⁸

M – Military

U.S. military involvement in Colombia is extremely important to Plan Colombia's success; it was initially divided into three phases. Phase I called on the U.S. military to train and equip a Counter-Narcotics Brigade, to service helicopters and to train pilots and their crews. Phase II centered on infrastructure support, specialized training and counter-narcotics intelligence support. Phase III supports the GOC in expanding its presence and control throughout the country.¹⁹ As the U.S. military pursued its original counter-narcotics mission, restrictions placed upon its numbers and authorities by Congress hampered its ability to remain effective. The military quickly learned that it was difficult to find distinctions between the terrorists and drug traffickers, which especially held true for the activities carried out by the FARC, ELN and AUC. In order for the U.S. military to economize the use of its forces, a change was needed for it to become fully effective. As a result, Congress, at the urging of the U.S. military, passed Expanded Authority legislation that permitted the military to use funds to support the Colombians in counter-narcotics activities also to be used to support them in counter-terrorism operations directed at the FARC, ELN and AUC. Further, Congress agreed to expand the ceiling of U.S. military personnel in Colombia from 400 to 800. The U.S. military had been hampered in its effectiveness because it could not meet the needs of Colombian military operations due to personnel restrictions. It should be noted,

however, that neither of these new authorities allow for U.S. military personnel to engage in combat. They remain restricted to safe areas.²⁰

The U.S. military is not only providing operational training to its Colombian counterparts; it is also laying the foundation for human rights and the respect of law into the Colombian military culture. In some ways, this initiative may be more important than operational effectiveness if Plan Colombia is going to fully succeed. The Colombians have created a Military Panel Justice Corps as part of their efforts in judicial reform. They now have a training program that "...teaches human rights and international law to attorneys, commander, officers, and sergeants."²¹ And possibly most importantly, like the U.S. military, the Colombian military now sends member of its legal corps in the field with commanders to provide advice. Again, this is a step that will engender trust between the military and the Colombian people. Results are starting to appear. "Under President Uribe's 'Democratic Security Policy,' extrajudicial executions in 2003 were down 48 percent, assassinations were down 41percent, homicides of trade unionists were down 68 percent and forced displacements were down 68 percent. Further, none of the units U.S. forces trained have been accused of human rights abuses."²² Indications for the last two years indicate that these trends are continuing.²³

E – Economy

Overcoming drugs, insurgent movements, paramilitary groups, corruption and human rights abuses, to name a few of the scourges that have ravaged Colombia, is only part of the solution for a viable and democratic Colombia. The economy must be strengthened to the point where it will grow and attract investment from the international business community. Without outside investment in the country, there is a very real danger that Plan Colombia will

not succeed and that the outlaw groups that operate in the country may destabilize the region and continue to threaten U.S. national security. A troubling survey conducted recently indicated that over half of Latin America favors an authoritarian leader over a democratic government if economic conditions can be improved.²⁴ This statement clearly points to the importance of improving, for the short- and long-term, Colombia's economy.

There are signs that the economy is growing stronger in Colombia after a period in which it faltered. The average annual growth rate for Colombia averaged four percent from the 1920s to the late 1990s – a remarkable figure considering its internal problems. Colombia has had the luxury of strong exports in flowers and coal and has increased its petroleum industry. But the FARC, ELN and AUC caused the economy to misstep in the late 1990s, primarily because the GOC has had to continue to allocate increasing amounts of its budget to fight the narco-terrorists. The key in Colombia has been to pursue sustained economic growth through programs that "...further open markets, encourages investment, and expands free trade."²⁵ The income disparity between the haves and have-nots has been great in Colombia, and the poor have served as a recruiting base for the FARC and ELN. It is extremely important that prosperity in Colombia spread to all levels of society. During Secretary Rice's recent visit to Bogotá, she stressed the importance of a Free Trade Agreement for the region that would include Colombia and, as result, build up its economy.²⁶

One of the economic challenges being addressed in Plan Colombia is the alternative development program, which goes hand-in-hand with the coca and opium eradication program. Many Colombian peasants grow coca or opium to earn a living; they have little else to fall back on. The key is to encourage them not to grow the coca and opium plants and to turn to legal economic alternatives. Under an AID initiative, the alternative development

program initially targeted the Putumayo and Caqueta departments, areas known for coca cultivation, and has now spread into other provinces. In June 2004, this program had touched over 34,000 families. Part of AID's alternative development program is to improve Colombia's infrastructure, so it is easier to get legal crops to market. As a result, new technologies and marketing assistance have been provided to the workers and legitimate businesses are appearing, an important element of a growing economy and establishing a middle class. Between 2001 and 2004, for example, 835 infrastructure projects were completed under Plan Colombia.²⁷

LE – Law Enforcement

The counter-narcotics problem in Colombia must ultimately be addressed through law enforcement means. Under Plan Colombia, many elements of the U.S. federal law enforcement community are assisting the Colombian police in this great endeavor. "Since President Uribe took office in August 2002, Colombian forces have seized nearly 1,200 kilograms of heroin."²⁸ In 2004 alone, "A record 178 metric tons of cocaine were captured through efforts of Colombia's police and military forces."²⁹ "The Anti-Narcotics Police Directorate (DIRAN) broke all interdiction records in 2004, with over 75 metric tons of processed cocaine (HCI) and coca base seized and 150 HCI laboratories destroyed."³⁰

The DEA has participated in numerous successful operations with DIRAN. Operations Mapale I and Mapale II, which were conducted by DIRAN and the DEA against FARC and AUC narco-traffickers, are just two examples that proved highly successful. 21 HCL/base labs were destroyed and 12 metric tons of coca paste, 27 metric tons of coca leaves, seven speedboats and 150 metric tons of precursor chemicals were seized.³¹

U.S. Department of Homeland Security law enforcement officers also work successfully with the Colombian police. DHS special agents, DIRAN personnel and elements of the private sector have engaged in a program to stop drugs from leaving Colombian ports. In 2004, more than 1.26 metric tons of narcotics were seized at Colombia's four major ports. This type of program has also been instituted at Colombia's international airports.³²

At various levels the U.S. Government is training the Colombian police to become a more professional and effective force. The DOS's Diplomatic Security Service (DSS), for example, has conducted training under the auspices of its Antiterrorism Assistance program (ATA). This has primarily involved personal protection training for the police who protect the President, Vice President and other national level figures. This training has expanded to also include a larger cadre of police who would be available to protect local Colombian officials, such as the mayor of Bogotá. Moreover, DSS has proposed the creation of a separate Colombian government agency modeled after DSS and the U.S. Secret Service that would handle all personal protection within the country in order to ensure professionalism and continuity. This agency could become a model for South America. Indeed, other Latin American countries have already shown an interest in this type of training and are prepared to send their police to Colombia to take advantage of it. Under the DOS's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, DSS is also conducting anti-kidnapping training, specifically to decrease this serious problem that has darkened Colombia for many years at all levels. The Vice President of Colombia has taken a personal interest in the program, as he was kidnapped during his youth and held captive by erstwhile drug kingpin Pablo Escobar.³³

Another Point of View

The U.S. and Colombian governments have lauded the successes of Plan Colombia, but many NGOs believe that the Plan has been a disaster for most Colombians or ineffectual at slowing the movement of drugs north to the United States. Although some of these groups indicate that improvements have occurred in Colombia because of the Plan, such as a drop in violent crime and a reduction in illicit crop production, they point to the high availability of cocaine and heroin in the United States and the continued human rights violations by the Colombian military and the AUC as indicators that true progress has been lacking. In one sense, they suggest that the U.S. war on drugs is not transparent. The focus, as they claim, seems to point more in the direction of the drug suppliers than the drug consumers. The argument continues that the U.S. Government should focus more heavily on reducing cocaine and heroin consumption in the United States. Evidence indicates that the supply of cocaine and heroin in the United States remains high, prices remain low and use remains robust.³⁴ United Nations reports on continued human rights abuses are often cited by NGOs as “business as usual” by the GOC. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) have indicated that extrajudicial executions and torture have increased at the hand of the military. The CCJ has reported that between December 1, 2002 and August 31, 2004, 1,899 civilians were killed or disappeared at the hands of paramilitary groups.³⁵

Groups and organizations that have criticized Plan Colombia do not necessarily call for the U.S. Government to disassociate itself with Colombia; however, they believe that funds and efforts should be refocused. Ideas are plentiful but most seem to strongly encourage the U.S. Government to pressure the GOC diplomatically to respect human rights

and the rule of law. Further, the U.S. Government is urged to place greater emphasis on open and fair peace negotiations, to include justice and reparations in discussions between the GOC and armed groups.³⁶

While a continued emphasis on human rights and the rule of law is important, and based on media and U.S. Government reports is being strongly pursued, groups calling for less military intervention against the insurgencies are shading their eyes from the truth.³⁷ In other words, the overwhelming majority of the FARC and ELN long ago dropped their belief in any type of political movement and emerged as narco-terrorists that pursue profit, enslave their own people and export death and destruction. Peace negotiations with the FARC, ELN and AUC should be pursued by the GOC but not at the expense of justice. Members of these groups who are responsible for criminal acts must be held accountable for the crimes they have committed. Ceasing military pressure against any of these groups would prove to be a sign of weakness and only encourage them to continue to destabilize the GOC and threaten the region. Colombia's recent history is replete with such examples.

Recommendation

The "DIME Plus One" review conducted in the preceding paragraphs illustrates the U.S. Government's accomplishments with Plan Colombia. The U.S. Government does not need to change its direction with diplomacy, information, the economy and law enforcement; however, a more aggressive U.S. military role must be enacted. The military has been effective in its support of the Colombian military, but it has also been hampered by the restrictions placed upon it by Congress. Congress rightly permitted the U.S. military to increase its personnel ceiling cap in Colombia and allowed it to assist the Colombian military directly in pursuing the FARC, ELN and AUC as opposed to only during counter-narcotics

operations. In order to take the U.S. military's role one-step farther and increase its effectiveness, Congress should authorize U.S. military personnel to leave safe areas and accompany Colombian soldiers during operations. It is important to keep one caveat in place, however: the U.S. military must not take the place of the Colombian military in this fight. This is Colombia's war.

There is precedent for this change in policy. In the 1980s, U.S. military personnel in El Salvador accompanied Salvadorian soldiers on operations against the insurgents there. This latitude provided the Americans with eyes on the scene to observe whether the training provided to the Salvadorians was effective and being used correctly in the field and to monitor the Salvadorians to ensure they were not committing human rights violations. There was no guesswork involved. Such an approach in Colombia would also be beneficial and has the potential to increase the pace of the Colombian offensive against the FARC, ELN and AUC. World history has shown that nations' militaries tend not to change their tactics from past wars; they are faulted for fighting the last war again and again. In the case of Colombia, the United States should follow the lessons of a past war and institute methods that were successful for it in Latin America before.³⁸

Conclusion

Latin America is becoming more important to the future of the United States. It is the number one source of new U.S. citizens. The economies of the United States and Latin American are tied together and hold great promise. U.S. trade with Latin America is also important, and by 2010 it is believed that it will surpass U.S. trade with the European Economic Community and Japan together. Sources of energy are also affected by this relationship. Latin America exports more petroleum to the U.S. than all of the Middle

Eastern countries combined.³⁹ Suffice it to say there is a substantial bond between the United States and Latin America that is growing stronger each day for better or for worse.

Colombia has a leading role to play in Latin America's future with the U.S. It is the second oldest democracy in Latin America and can serve as a leader in the region and as an example of good government to its neighbors. All is not rosy, however. The United States and Colombia are at a crossroads. Colombia continues to face serious internal problems because of narco-terrorists that threaten its democratic government and the stability of Latin America. But there is also good news. The narco-terrorists have been weakened as a result of Plan Colombia.⁴⁰ But if they are not defeated soon, they will again grow strong and continue to threaten U.S. interests in the region and its national security. Therefore, the United States must continue to support the GOC in its fight against narco-terrorists and adjust its strategy to best fit the circumstances as they change. The "DIME Plus One" analysis conducted in this paper indicates that the U.S. is on the right track, but the U.S. military needs to expand its role to better assist the GOC in defeating the FARC, ELN and AUC, groups that must cease to exist in order to bring down the drug trade in Colombia. The U.S. Government has successfully battled other insurgencies in Latin America, and Congress must now recognize this fact and adopt measures that proved successful in the past. The United States must not backtrack on the progress it has made in supporting the GOC. To do so, would endanger and threaten the brave progress made by a close American ally – and ultimately threaten U.S. national security.

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