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Lessons from Colombia's Road to Recovery, 1982-2010

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Lessons from Colombia's Road to Recovery, 1982-2010

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Preface

At the beginning of Alvaro Uribe Velez's first term as President in 2002, many analysts considered Colombia to be at the brink of becoming a "failed state." Guerrilla and "self-defense" militia activities and violence, illicit drug production and trafficking, assassinations, and kidnappings were rampant and seemingly uncontrollable. Previous presidents had attempted to curb these problems without success. Colombians were disheartened with their nation's prospects for the future.

By 2010, when President Uribe left power, the situation in Colombia had altered dramatically. Although many problems had not been totally resolved, indicators in all social, economic, and security aspects of life in the country showed the positive trajectories characteristic of an ascending democracy.

This Occasional Paper focuses on and explores the factors and strategies that produced such an extraordinary transformation in Colombia's security environment. These ideas summarize the results of a two-year research project at the request of the U.S. Southern Command, conducted by a team of experts at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies. The project's objective, also the subject of a forthcoming edited volume, was to determine the strategic elements that enabled the Uribe Administration to deal successfully with Colombia's security problems.

The study identifies five convergent factors that interacted synergistically to help Colombia avoid an approaching disaster and recover the ability to control its destiny. While insightful, these factors are not intended to serve as a blueprint for countries facing security challenges. Based on cultural, historical, geographical, and other realities, each nation must clearly address its security problems with approaches that are congruent to its unique situation. Nevertheless, an awareness of Colombia's experience and of the decisions made during its difficult years may help others avoid critical mistakes. Perhaps even more importantly, this case offers the encouraging example that a country can overcome enormous security challenges through political resolve, strong leadership and institutions, international support, and by capitalizing on the mistakes of its adversaries.

Dr. Richard D. Downie
Director, CHDS

Executive Summary¹

Between 2002 and 2010, Colombia made remarkable progress toward establishing security and governance in the face of multiple threats: insurgents, paramilitaries, and organized crime, all supported by illicit markets (most notably drug trafficking). In 1998, U.S. intelligence analysts were predicting the overthrow of the Colombian government by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios de Colombia*) insurgency. The Colombian government and society rallied to develop new strategies to confront the threats, however. The United States also provided significant, sustained assistance. By 2005 the government had seized the strategic offensive. In 2008, government forces began to kill or capture FARC senior leaders regularly. Although the conflict is not over, prospects for terminating the conflict look promising. This study set out to determine how Colombia went from near failure to palpable success.

Five important factors converged to produce Colombia's recovery: *Leadership, Political Consensus, Institutional Strength, U.S. Assistance, and Enemy Incapacity to Adapt.*

Five Convergent Factors

- 1. Leadership:** Alvaro Uribe's grand strategic vision, ability to translate it into a plan, and hold people accountable for its execution were key to his success. Capable leaders in other institutions both before Uribe's presidency and during his government—most notably the military and police forces—were also critical.
- 2. Political Consensus:** The failed peace process of 1998–2002, in which the insurgents made a mockery of the effort, served as the catalyst in developing the mass support necessary to implement Uribe's strategy and policies.
- 3. Institutional Strength:** Colombia's ability to quickly implement President Uribe's Democratic Security Strategy depended on strong institutions, which resulted from previous judicial, anticorruption, and security force reforms.
- 4. United States Assistance:** The United States aid played an important enabling role, but did not drive Colombian policy and strategy.
- 5. Inability of Armed Opponents to Adapt:** Rapid execution of Colombia's security strategy kept insurgents, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers off balance and unable to develop effective countermeasures.

These five factors converged synergistically to produce Colombia's continuing success

¹ In 2010, CHDS was asked to carry out a study to determine how Colombia was able to reverse its security situation from a near-failed State circa 1998 to a model of security and governance circa 2010. That study, titled *Colombia's Road to Recovery: Security and Governance 1982–2010*, was published in June 2010. This work is a summary of the main conclusions and lessons learned that emerged from that study.

story. While the most influential factor was Uribe's leadership, the political consensus and popular support that followed the failed peace process was necessary to achieve Colombia's objectives. Uribe implemented his strategy and achieved rapid results early in his presidency because of the strength of Colombia's existing institutions. U.S. aid played a vital role in accelerating Colombia's success. These factors generated a "virtuous cycle"—Concrete Results → Public Trust → Government Empowerment → Concrete Results—that systematically advanced Colombia's relative state of well being. If Colombia can sustain this virtuous circle, the conflict should soon be consigned to history.

Key Lessons Learned

The Colombian experience offers 20 key lessons for dealing with internal irregular conflict. These can be divided into two broad categories: Political-Strategic and Operational.

Political-Strategic Lessons

- 1. Total government commitment is required to resolve internal conflict.** Colombia experienced sustained success only after the government developed an effective strategy that mobilized and focused all elements of national power on internal security problems.
- 2. Security is a prerequisite for democratic governance.** Without legitimate, effective security that addresses the protection of individual rights, a democratic government can fall prey to irregular actors.
- 3. Strong, effective leadership is essential to success in irregular conflict.** The tipping point between muddling through and moving toward victory in Colombia was the election of a leader who could translate his bold vision into action. Identifying and enabling effective leaders is critical.
- 4. Public perception management is vital to popular support.** Perceptions are as critical as concrete results in maintaining political consensus and popular support. The government must be perceived as engaging in a dynamic process to resolve security threats that adjust to shifting circumstances.
- 5. Legitimacy: a vital government enabler.** To obtain legitimacy, governments must deliver results that are perceived positively and obtained legally and lawfully.
- 6. Governments and irregular force negotiating strategies must share a strategic objective to be productive.** Negotiations to end wars will not bear fruit unless both sides seek similar outcomes.
- 7. A strong commitment to human rights enables government freedom of action.** Security forces must take human rights seriously, developing appropriate training, doctrine, rules

of engagement, and control mechanisms. To ensure compliance, governments must fully investigate complaints and discipline human rights violators.

- 8. An independent, impartial, and effective justice system is critical to consolidate security gains.** The enemy will exploit perceived injustice to justify their actions, recruit members, and increase popular support. Justice is a critical government tool for fair prosecution of irregular enemies of the State.
- 9. Current counterinsurgency doctrine must address new realities.** Success in Colombia required more than just a counterinsurgency strategy. The nexus of illegal markets, criminal organizations, and powerful enemies intent on establishing a new regime created new realities not reflected in current counterinsurgency doctrine.
- 10. Illegal economies are transforming the nature of irregular conflicts.** Illicit economies have transformed irregular conflicts in at least two ways. First, they generate enough resources to allow irregular actors to exercise parallel power, forcing governments to control all of their territory, not just population centers. Second, control of illegal resources has become a strategic objective that can prolong internal wars.
- 11. U.S. assistance achieved impact when it aligned to support Colombia's strategy.** When partially aligned with Colombia's strategy and objectives, U.S. aid did not have a decisive effect. Although symbolically important as a moral commitment to Colombia, the impact of U.S. aid became concrete and effective only when United States and Colombian interests aligned.
- 12. A lack of regional cooperation may jeopardize successful consolidation.** FARC developed strategic depth by moving across Colombia's borders and receiving aid from neighboring States sympathetic to their cause. This development has prolonged the war and made the complete defeat of the FARC difficult. Regional cooperation is a critical factor.
- 13. Internal irregular conflicts constantly mutate and evolve.** Irregular groups constantly adapt to survive and succeed. Similarly, governments must adapt to anticipate and respond as the threats change.

Operational Lessons

Seven main lessons flow from Colombia's development of three lines of operation: (a) gaining and retaining territorial control; (b) sustaining offensive operations; and (c) special operations.

- 14. Permanent, sustained offensive operations help to regain territorial control and the strategic offensive.** Periodic offensive operations to inflict tactical defeats were unproductive unless they achieved territorial control. Irregular enemies with territorial control could

continue illegal economic activity, allowing them to build forces and project power toward government-controlled territory. Sustained offensives allowed the government to regain territorial control and systematically reduce the armed opponents' freedom of action.

- 15. Robust mobility is key to recovery of territorial control.** Government mobility helped constrict the enemy's freedom of action. Colombia's increased air and riverine mobility allowed security forces to project, recover, sustain, and consolidate less-governed and ungoverned spaces.
- 16. Close air support: an important strategic force multiplier.** Close air support capability was vital in offensive, defensive, and high-value target operations.
- 17. Human Intelligence (HUMINT) was critical; Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Image Intelligence (IMINT), and technological improvements enhanced operational and strategic intelligence.** HUMINT provided the most essential and accurate intelligence, which SIGINT and IMINT served to confirm and update. A secure intelligence network allowed Colombian forces to obtain and disseminate intelligence from remote areas to other security forces as well as to develop strategic intelligence.
- 18. Targeting high-value enemy leaders impacts public perception, but is not a decisive center of gravity.** Successful attacks on leadership targets offer high-visibility gains that generate political support for security policies and throw enemy forces off balance. However, irregular enemy forces always find replacements to continue the fight.
- 19. Well-regulated local forces are vital to government strategy; uncontrolled, unofficial local forces can unhinge government efforts.** Local forces that know the local area and have vested interests can provide security in regions threatened by enemy attacks or recently recovered from enemy domination. These groups can free up national forces for offensive operations, but must be part of a well-defined strategy and have sufficient training, doctrine, and supervisory control. Otherwise, local forces can delegitimize government actions.
- 20. Sustained whole-of-government implementation is indispensable in consolidating security gains.** Security gains are likely to be temporary unless a whole-of-government approach is used to reestablish government presence in conflicted zones. The government must address the root causes of the conflict and solve the grievances of affected populations vulnerable to recruitment and manipulation by irregular enemies. Government programs in such areas are unlikely to be effective without first establishing effective security.

Five Convergent Factors That Changed Colombia

This study found that Colombia's successful turnaround—from crisis toward consolidation—can be attributed to the convergence of five broad variables or factors:

1. leadership;
2. political consensus;
3. institutional strength;
4. U.S. assistance; and
5. the inability of irregular threats to meaningfully counter government strategy.

These five factors converged at a critical moment in Colombia's history, redounding in favor of its lawful government and institutions.



Former President Uribe and former Army Commander Carlos Ospina traveling to a troop inspection. Photo: Carlos Ospina.

1. Leadership.

There is little doubt that much of the progress in Colombia is the direct the product of President Alvaro Uribe's exceptional leadership from 2002 to 2010. His philosophy of having a clear grand strategy, then personally holding people accountable down to the lowest level, had a major impact, resulting in today's positive situation. Uribe did not achieve this alone, however. Prior to his presidency, military leadership under Generals Fernando Tapias, Jorge Mora, Carlos Ospina, and Freddy Padilla had correctly assessed Colombian military weaknesses and then reformed the institution as the first stage to defeat armed opponents on the battlefield, regain the tactical initiative, and, finally, gain the strategic initiative.

2. Political Consensus.

Solving the internal security question was paramount on everyone's agenda, but there was no consensus on how this could or should be done. Since the government of Belisario Betancur (1982–1986), the Colombian State had attempted peace negotiations with several guerrilla groups. These negotiations experienced variable success. They were successful with the M-19, Quintin Lame, and with part of the EPL (National Liberation Army or *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) and the ELN (Popular Liberation Army or *Ejército Popular de Liberación*), but they did not succeed with most of the ELN and the FARC. A majority of the country did not think that the security forces could beat the various irregular groups, and a corresponding number believed that a negotiated settlement was the only solution. In 1998, the country elected Andres Pastrana,



A riverine combat element in San José del Guaviare, 2004. Photo: Carlos Ospina.

believing him the best qualified to carry out a successful peace process. The Pastrana government made all of the concessions possible to the FARC, as well as significant concessions to the ELN, to facilitate a peace agreement. However, the insurgents' continued acts of violence, terrorism, and intransigence in the negotiations turned a hopeful population against them, making it clear that the only way out was significant military and police action. In 2002, in an extraordinary first-round election, Uribe was elected by a significant majority of the people, running on a platform to restore countrywide security through increased military and police action. Quickly implementing his program, Uribe was able to usher in a palpable improvement of security for the average Colombian, periodic high-profile victories against violent opponents' leadership cadres, and general improvements in economic conditions, all of which helped to sustain the political consensus to continue his security policies. Uribe enjoyed a 70 percent-plus approval rating throughout his presidency, allowing his supporters in the Colombian Legislature to modify the Constitution and making it possible for him to win a second presidential term (2006–2010).

3. Institutional Strength.

Uribe's quick initial results and ability to rapidly expand and project State power and presence throughout the countryside was due in large measure to already existing, credible institutions. The police and military in particular had already gone through significant reforms. The police were overhauled during the Gaviria government in 1992, and the military began their reform at the end of the Ernesto Samper government in 1997. These major overhauls winnowed out many elements suspected of misbehavior or incompetence, while reorganizing and reequipping



A patrol of the 53rd Jungle Infantry Battalion prepares to patrol the Pasto-Tumaco pipeline, Gualtal, Nariño, March 2012. Photo: David Spencer.

the armed forces to face the threats more effectively. By the time Uribe took office in 2002 and implemented his security plan, he could count on security organizations capable of rapidly implementing his vision.

On the political front, Colombian democracy is second only to that of the United States in terms of longevity in the hemisphere, having experienced only a brief period of military rule in the 1950s. Furthermore, since 1991 this system had undergone a series of reforms designed to make the government more responsive to the root causes of violence. The 1991 constitution guaranteed citizens many rights, decentralized government, and broke up the monopoly of power in the hands of the two traditional parties: Liberals and Conservatives. Unfortunately, the new constitution was also heavily influenced by the drug cartels, and initially prohibited extradition. After the death of drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, however, it was amended to include extradition. In 2006, the Magna Carta was also amended to allow reelection of the president. Over time, additional improvements have reduced corruption and fraud. While not perfect, the Colombian political system is quite robust and largely respectful of the rights of its citizens.

In the legal arena, the 1991 constitution reinforced the political charter by balancing executive power with that of a number of independent courts, including the Supreme Court, a constitutional court, and an attorney general's office, which investigates and prosecutes crimes. Whether one agrees or disagrees with their efficiency—the many holes in the system based on an inquisitive system adopted from French Napoleonic code resulted in a high degree of impunity and large backlogs of cases—the independence of the Colombian courts conferred legitimacy to the legal system. In 2007, Colombia attempted to modify the legal structure by adopting an accusatory system modeled on that of the United States. While there have been many problems in the transition from an inquisitive to an accusatory system, the efficiency has improved greatly. At the same time, Colombia's ability to continue to make progress in its attempt to establish security and end the conflict will depend on its ability to continue to reform and improve the legal system.

The Colombians developed a unique approach to address the root causes of the conflict. They concluded that the lack of State presence and services was at the root of popular discontent. To ensure that areas recently liberated from irregular forces' presence did not spawn new recruits for these organizations or fall back under their domination, the Colombian government developed the "National Consolidation Plan" and the Center for the Coordination of Integral Action (known by the Spanish-language acronym, CCAI) to carry out this task. The CCAI was not a new bureaucratic structure, but rather a council that coordinated the activities of various government ministries to recover these areas for the State. How the conflict will play out into the future depends a great deal on the success of this consolidation effort.

4. U.S. Assistance.

Having played a significant role in the consolidation process, in the early 1990s foreign capacity building was particularly important for the reform of the police. The piecemeal assistance to the Colombian military at this time was not as effective and did not correspond to any kind of strategy. During the Pastrana administration, the Colombian government received major assistance from the United States under Plan Colombia. The initial impact was mostly on morale, however; in its time of deepest peril, Colombia found that it was not alone and had an ally that was providing material support as part of a strategic plan with identified ends, ways, and means. This assistance was much more effective than previous aid. Nonetheless, the effect remained limited because U.S. and Colombian interests did not coincide except in a narrowly defined area. Colombia had a broad internal security problem, while the United States was interested only in combating drug trafficking from Colombia to the United States. This meant that initially strict limits were placed on U.S. assistance, so it could be used only against narcotics-related targets. Over time, however, the United States began to realize that the various internal threats to Colombia could not be separated from narcotics trafficking.

Furthermore, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks broadened the definitions of U.S. interests, offering the perspective of insurgent and terrorist threats to its allies as potential threats to its homeland. Authorization was granted for counter-drug assistance to be used against terrorist targets, although its application remained somewhat limited. Finally, in 2003 the United States determined that its interests meshed nearly completely with Colombian government strategy, and directed that its assistance match the lines of operation identified in Uribe's Democratic Security Strategy. It was after this alignment that U.S. assistance began to have



Elements of the FUDRA practice helicopter assault. Photo: David Spencer.

its most significant impact. With this assistance, Colombia was able to sustain an offensive against the FARC's strategic base area in southeastern Colombia. This, along with other measures, contributed to the dramatic drop in the FARC terrorist actions. Under this regime, the United States sought to enhance Colombian State capabilities or assist the Colombians to create new ones to better accomplish these State objectives. In the military arena, air mobility, intelligence, special operations, and precision-guided weapons were deemed to be particularly important. Support for the police included counter-narcotics, area control, and base defense. In other areas, efforts addressed the incentives to participate in the illegal economy through alternative development. These were not successful when carried out independent of the security operations. Later this was changed and emphasis placed on pairing development projects with security operations as an integral part of the consolidation effort. When security and nonsecurity elements worked together in concert toward a single purpose, they proved to be much more successful.

5. The Threats.

Guerrillas—particularly the two main groups, FARC and ELN—drug trafficking, and the paramilitaries comprised the main threats to the Colombian State. (Although outside the scope of this study, the State was also beleaguered by high levels of organized and ordinary crime.) While in the past these threats may have been approached as very different problems, in Colombia all



Gen. Carlos Ospina discusses operations with task force commander Gen. Reinaldo Castellanos (center) and military intelligence chief Gen. Carlos Alberto Fracica during the course of Operation "JM" circa 2004 Photo: Carlos Ospina.

of these irregular threats were essentially different symptoms of the same disease—the absence and/or ineffectiveness of the State. The insurgent organizations, the FARC and the ELN, were considered the most dangerous to the State because of their strategies to overthrow the existing democratic structures, replacing it with a socialist model State. Both the FARC and the ELN adopted variants of the Maoist prolonged war strategy. The FARC was stronger in the southeast, while the ELN was dominant in the northeast of the country. Each gained considerable strength in the 1980s owing to two important factors—the peace process and the insurgent involvement in illegal economies. Although bold and well intentioned, government approaches that attempted to terminate the insurgencies through peace processes actually redounded to jeopardize the State, since neither the FARC nor the ELN were defeated or had any intention of demobilizing. Thus, the peace processes gave the insurgents national platforms from which to spread their message; both the FARC and the ELN were able to enlist significant numbers of new recruits. To encourage negotiations, the Colombian government also restrained the military, reducing armed operations to minimum levels. This allowed the insurgents to rest, train, and re-equip their forces to unprecedented levels. The fighting was increasingly violent after each successive peace process.

A second factor contributing to insurgent growth in the 1980s was their involvement in illegal economies. While the FARC became heavily invested in kidnapping and drug trafficking, the ELN engaged in kidnapping and extortion of the oil industry, joining the FARC later in drug trafficking. This gave both organizations strength far beyond their numbers; however, both remained insurgent organizations with insurrectional strategies and ideologies. At the same time their involvement in criminal enterprises had a significant impact. In part in reaction to this, while both groups became militarily strong, in the political arena both the FARC and the ELN remained weak, and actually saw a reduction of popular support. In addition to acquiring significant resources through involvement in criminal enterprises, insurgent combat strength was a product of government weakness.

As a result of government weakness, the paramilitaries emerged. Initially established legally as part of an effort to develop local auxiliary civil defense forces—as was called for by British and U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine of the 1960s—by the mid-1980s these legal forces began going beyond their lawful role. They became penetrated by drug trafficking organizations that used them for their own ends, acquired offensive weapons, and assassinated suspected guerrilla auxiliaries with varying degrees of collusion from individuals belonging to local communities, elite society, and security forces. This illegal activity caused the government to declare these paramilitary forces illegal, but at the same time the government created a vacuum by doing little to replace them with legal forces. As the guerrillas gained strength, the now-illegal paramilitary forces also grew. Although these forces certainly prevented the insurgents from

expanding their influence in the north of the country, at the strategic level they also undermined the legitimacy of the government by committing gross atrocities against supposed insurgent supporters.

Permeating both insurgent and paramilitary organizations were the drug traffickers. The drug traffickers adapted as the government adopted different strategies to combat them. As the demand for narcotics remained relatively constant, and as the profits remained lucrative, organizations found ways to meet the demand. Moving away from the big cartel model of the 1980s and early 1990s, drug traffickers sought refuge in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the form of mini-cartels.

After the government adopted Uribe's "Democratic Security Policy," the political weakness of the insurgents became apparent. Without political depth, the insurgents could not effectively resist the increased military strength of the State. Without abandoning their strategy, they employed increasingly decentralized formations and irregular tactics. They turned increasingly to terrorism and the use of improvised mines and explosives. However, because these lacked deep popular support, there was little impact on the government strategy. Despite their own efforts, the insurgents proved incapable of adequately responding to Uribe's security strategy, being systematically driven first from ground where they had gained influence, and



Sentry stands guard at the 53rd Jungle Infantry Battalion, Gualtal, Nariño, March 2012. Photo: David Spencer.

then, from terrain that they had dominated for decades.

Meanwhile, the increased security provided by the government and the withdrawal of the insurgent forces took away the political justification for the existence of the paramilitaries. As a result, most paramilitaries agreed to demobilize over a period of about two-and-a-half years.

The drug trafficking organizations were also significantly impacted by the government's security strategy, and were again forced to transform in order to adapt. Where Colombian organizations had controlled growth, production, refinement, and transportation to market, they now were supplemented by renewed growth in Peru and Bolivia, supplanted by transportation to market by Mexican cartels. They remained largely in cultivation, production, and refinement, although some transportation continues. Cultivation and production were confined to increasingly remote parts of the country, such as Nariño and Catatumbo. However, for the foreseeable future drug trafficking is likely to remain a significant security problem.

The guerrillas' continued involvement in drug trafficking and illegal markets remains a significant factor behind the failure of the Colombian government to deliver the final blow to the anti-State insurgents. Furthermore, the market has proven big enough that new groups looking like paramilitary groups, but without a political agenda, have emerged to pursue drug trafficking. Known as criminal bands (BACRIM), this emerging type of group is already seen by some as Colombia's most important security problem.

Besides illegal markets, the insurgents in particular have been bolstered by a regional environment increasingly sympathetic to their cause. Governments such as those of Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Nicaragua, which often include veterans of Cold War insurgencies, have provided varied levels of support to Colombia's insurgent groups. This has ranged from the refusal to condemn FARC and ELN as terrorist groups and the unwillingness to carry out operations against Colombian insurgent members in their own countries, to providing refuge and moral support to the insurgents and permitting them to use their territory to conduct training, logistics, and other activities, to offering significant materiel support.

Today the Colombian government has the strategic initiative, is on the offensive, and has reduced the area of influence of its irregular threats—insurgents, the transformed paramilitaries (BACRIM), and narcotics traffickers—to fairly remote and isolated parts of the country. However, the continued insatiable market for narcotics and an insurgent-friendly regional environment may prolong the internal conflict, making it difficult to bring it to closure.

Key Lessons Learned

Twenty primary lessons to deal with internal irregular conflict may be drawn from the Colombian experience. These can be divided into two broad categories: Political-Strategic, and Operational lessons.

Political-Strategic Lessons

1. A government’s total commitment is required to resolve internal conflict. Colombia clearly demonstrates that internal irregular conflicts have been mislabeled “small wars” or “low-intensity conflicts.” They may appear small in terms of the sizes of battles and the number of resulting casualties from any one encounter, but in little else. Small wars usually last longer than regular wars, and when the sum of casualties and costs over this time is added up, they can be just as costly, or more so, than some conventional wars. Internal irregular conflicts are enormous undertakings for governments, and in order to achieve success they require total political commitment, strategic planning, and the assignment of huge resources from multiple sectors of society. What makes internal irregular conflicts complicated is that they have to be fought simultaneously in multiple spheres of action. All conflicts do, but conventional conflicts have fairly discrete phases: normal politics followed by some sort of crisis, followed



Minigun door gunner on a police counter-narcotics helicopter near Tumaco, Nariño, March 2012. Photo: David Spencer.

by attempts by diplomats to resolve the crisis, which end in failure and result in armed conflict lasting for a determined period. Once the fighting has ended, the final political outcome is decided through diplomatic negotiations, leading to the resumption of normal politics under the new terms. These phases allow governments to focus their energies on the phase in question for which governments already have available institutions and tools specifically designed to deal with these actions. Each of these institutions generally has clear roles and relatively clear objectives, and for the most part these roles and objectives do not overlap. While this is somewhat simplistic, it is nevertheless useful for illustration purposes. In internal irregular conflict, the phases do not occur in sequence but rather simultaneously, and—in contrast to conventional war—roles and objectives are not as distinct or as clear. Military forces take on police-like roles and police take on military-type ones. Both often take on political roles, and so on. In addition, on top of military, police, political, and diplomatic spheres of action, there is also struggle in the social and economic arenas. Finally, current trends suggest that the additional spheres of action—such as the criminal arena caused by the increasing involvement of illegal economies—are making small wars today often much more complex than conventional wars.

The term “small war” then really derives from an erroneous conceptualization of the problem. Conventional war (or “big war”) is usually fought within well-defined and internationally agreed-upon limits at both the strategic and the operational levels, even if they occur within what is known as Total War. There continue to be rules and limits observed by both sides, such as the exclusion of noncombatant civilian populations, proportional or rational use of force, legitimacy of ends, clarity of objectives, and so forth. On the other hand, small war, particularly as it is evolving today, is absolute in every way. There are no recognizable front or rear lines; there is no respect for the civilian population or for the conventions that govern conventional war. In fact, unarmed populations are often the objective of the war and thus an integral part of the conflict whether they are willing participants or not. The State confronted with this reality must—as Colombia did—commit all of its State capacity to combat this type of conflict, where even military victory can become a social defeat and, if so, then a political defeat that can translate into a decisive defeat for the government. States that continue to view these problems as “police actions” or ad hoc missions for military forces without providing strategic direction or committing all of the State’s tools and resources may experience temporal successes, but they will not find long-term solutions to the problem.

2. Strong security facilitates democratic government. Events in Colombia help solve a long-argued debate in Latin America about the role of security in democracy. Is security a product of solving social problems, or does effective security create the conditions that allow social problems to be solved? The Colombian experience overwhelmingly supports the latter

argument. It is only with effective security that social services and ministries can carry out the programs that begin to change the social environment. Furthermore, Colombia demonstrates that when social programs are carried out independently of security they fail in the mid- and long-term, and have little but a temporary, short-term effect. If they are carried out in areas where anti-State forces dominate, they only serve to strengthen the authority and domination of these forces by de facto giving these forces the control of additional resources. However, Colombia also demonstrates that the security window is fragile. In other words, it is not enough to establish security. If government does not move in to resolve social concerns, or if security forces behave abusively, insecurity can return. In Colombia this did not happen. Security has been established, and behind that security other government ministries have followed to strengthen or reestablish services. While some abuses were committed by individuals of the security forces, these abuses have been kept to a minimum through the establishment of clear rules of engagement and swift investigation and punishment of abuses. Overall then, security has been greatly enhanced and progress made toward solving social problems. What this implies is that a new model of democratic State is possible—one in which democracy is founded on a strong security apparatus. This could be called the Strong Democratic State.

Due to historical factors two concepts about democratic States emerged in Latin America at the end of the Cold War. The first one was that democracy didn't need or desire strong security. It was thought that democracy implied an absence of internal armed conflict because political disputes would now be resolved through elections and the democratic process. Weak security forces could be controlled by civilians and would not pose a political threat to the democratic institutions. The implication was that strong security forces were a source of insecurity and political instability.

The second concept about the democratic State was the idea that it was the sole responsibility of the State to guarantee individual rights. This was actually a holdover from the previous concept of the State as an entity separate from the citizens. This ignored the true spirit of democratic government where governance is of the people and by the people. In other words, that the government and the people are not separate, but that government is a manifestation of the people's will and therefore that the relationship between the two is contractual—both sides agree to abide by a mutually agreed-upon set of rules in the interest of the whole. Under this latter concept, the people are part of the security solution. Under the former, security was the sole responsibility of the State.

The result of these two assumptions has been the creation of weak States suffering high levels of crime as well as impunity. This in turn impinged on the ability of these States to solve social and economic problems, which has produced profound discontent among the population governed by democratic regimes. People have expressed their discontent with democracy in

two ways: First, by seeking political solutions through non-democratic forms, such as through populist regimes that, although elected democratically, soon begin to systematically disestablish the democratic institutions with the excuse of greater effectiveness and efficiency. Second, people have turned to private, illegal, and informal solutions. If the government can't or won't solve people's problems, private, illegal, and informal enterprises step into the void and offer a chimera that these problems can be solved extra-legally. In terms of security, people turn to private security guards, gated communities, and personal weapons. In extremes they form irregular militias or private justice groups, or they hire contract killers. In the economic realm, people get involved in all sorts of illegal economies, from theft to pirating copyrighted commercial articles to drug trafficking and major crime.

Although Colombia has a long way to go, it has also shown that the Strong Democratic State is a viable alternative. Strong security is not incompatible with democracy—quite the opposite. Colombia found that robust security is the foundation of democracy and is the basis on which all other democratic activity flourishes. Robust security has to be based on three important principles, however: first, the subordination of the security forces to civilian authorities; second, complete respect for the law by the security forces; and third, that security is the shared responsibility of all members of democratic society—not just of the government, or a portion of the government, the security forces. While the security forces may be the primary tools of government to implement security, all citizens have roles and responsibilities that need to be well defined and regulated.



Colombian soldiers in formation in southern Putumayo, October 2000. Photo: David Spencer.

In Colombia the wealthy paid extra taxes, combat exemptions for the sons of the middle class serving in the military were lifted, sons of outlying towns and villages served in the “peasant soldier” platoons, and millions of people participated in the “networks of cooperators.” In return for civilian cooperation and participation in security, the State developed a new concept of security. Traditionally, Latin American security forces provided security for the government, for the economy, and for the elite supporters of the government. The security apparatus was used to control the remainder of the population. In Colombia this concept of security was changed to encompass security for all of the population regardless of status. When the government sought to provide security for all of the population they called the new concept Democratic Security. As a result, confidence in the government increased, participation grew, and security increased, which led to increased popular participation in democratic institutions. With security, the economy grew and more taxes were paid, both because of increased money to pay them and because more people were participating in the legal economy from which taxes were generated. This gave the government more resources with which to provide increased security, as well as invest in social programs. In Colombia a virtuous circle occurred in which the investment in lawful security for the broad population produced confidence in the government, which then produced growth of the economy, which produced increased welfare and resources for the State, which allowed them to increase security for the population, and so on. While the process has been far from perfect and there continue to be both security and social vacuums yet to be filled, the positive progress between what Colombia was and what it has become is remarkable.

3. Strong and effective leadership is essential to succeed in irregular conflict. The contribution of leadership to success in Colombia cannot be underestimated. Colombia changed dramatically when it elected a leader, Alvaro Uribe, who had a strategic vision, was able to mobilize society in support of it, clearly articulated a policy, and then could hold his subordinates accountable for accomplishing his plan. If they could not, he found replacements who could. Remarkably, Uribe was able to maintain and actually increase his national support base through two 4-year presidential terms, ending his presidency with a popularity greater than 70 percent. This was because he obtained results that were palpable to the population and was able to communicate those results effectively on a regular basis. The recurring successes throughout his presidency reinforced his image as an effective leader and maintained the support of the Colombian people for a prolonged period of time. This leadership also gained the confidence of his primary international supporter—the United States—which remained committed to Colombia at a fairly robust level (about US\$300 million-plus a year) throughout his presidency. Other countries such as Britain and Spain provided assistance at much more modest levels. In addition to political leadership, both the Colombian military and the Colombian

police were blessed with capable leadership that carried them through significant reforms, albeit prior to the Uribe government. The police reform made them capable of combating the drug trafficking organizations, and the military reform enabled them to take on the guerrillas and make a clean break from the paramilitaries. While it is possible that Uribe's leadership could have been sufficient to implement the police and military reforms, it is probable that it would have taken Uribe much longer to accomplish what he did had the police and military leadership not come before and the security institutions not been as robust as they were as a result of enlightened institutional leadership. Without effective leadership, it is likely that Colombia would either still be muddling through or on the brink of defeat.

4. Public perception management is critical to developing and maintaining critical mass.

In Colombia, perception was everything to the success of internal conflict and security operations. Perception is a complicated formula, however. For example, as of this writing—early 2012—there is again a perception of insecurity in Colombia, which is causing a degree of discontent with the government, and yet when compared to 2002, in objective terms the security situation in Colombia is much improved. Furthermore, there have been notable spectacular successes under the current government, such as the death of FARC Secretariat leader Alfonso Cano, FARC chief military commander, Mono Jojoy, and a BACRIM commander (alias “Cuchillo”), that five years ago could only have been part of a dream. The difference is not in the objective indicators, because they are better today than they were in 2004–2005. The difference is in the perception of what the government is doing about security. At that time there were weekly cabinet-level security council meetings, as well as local security council meetings with the president on the weekends. At the latter there was unscripted popular participation and when the president made promises about security, he made sure that the government kept his promises. Uribe constantly called his generals and commanders to account for what they were doing about security. Finally, the government was decisive. The president made decisions, and more importantly he took responsibility for the decisions that were made. When failures occurred, the president immediately took responsibility and explained the cause to the public. When this happened, and it happened more than once, the population forgave the mistakes. What they did not forgive was indecision and perceived cover-ups.

The perception during the Uribe presidency was that the government was making progress toward solving the security problem. Under the current government the president has said that his main focus is the economy. Given the circumstances, this may be the correct call. However, he said that security was a continuing priority and designated a trusted national security adviser to run this important policy. Despite this, publicly there is no insight into how the security policy is being run. If there are weekly security councils, it is not a generally

known fact. The local security councils have been replaced by economic councils, and where under the Uribe government they were unscripted and open to the public, these meetings are now closed and prepared. What is being discussed and the decisions that are made are unknown. What accountability for security failures exists is unknown. Because the security adviser does not appear in public with the minister of defense and the generals, how the government is attempting to resolve the ongoing security issues remains a rather obscure subject, leaving the field open to speculation and criticism. The security situation in 2011 is no doubt better than it was in 2004–2005, and the government today may be doing as much or more than the previous government in terms of resolving security problems, but there is a perception of backsliding on these issues because the government's efforts are less visible. Finally, the Colombian government is a victim of its own success in the sense that citizens' expectations for security are higher due to the successes of the Uribe government. This means that it is even more critical for the government to work on perceptions, particularly since President Santos was elected on the



Colombian soldiers after a successful ambush in Meta, December 2000. Photo: David Spencer.

perception that he would continue the Uribe security policies. Managing perceptions contributed greatly to the success of the Uribe-era Democratic Security Policy. Keeping ahead of the perception curve will help determine the continued success of Colombian government security policies and the continuation of a Strong Democratic State in Colombia.

5. Legitimacy is one of the most important centers of gravity for the government. The conflict in Colombia has demonstrated that in irregular conflicts, one of the most vital centers of gravity for the government is legitimacy. Legitimacy is a combination of results of actions and perceptions. Colombia has shown that results, and not just actions, are very important. Between 1982 and 2002 the Colombian government took many actions to solve problems, but few of these produced results, and few leaders focused on the results as much as on the actions themselves. By focusing on actions more than results, these leaders could feel as if they were making progress, when in fact they were not, or at least not toward the goals that had been set. Outcomes that were achieved were often unintentional. Since outcomes were not necessarily rewarded or punished, there was little incentive for modifying behavior. The result was public ambiguity toward the government and a perception of impotence, which led the people to seek alternative means to solve their problems. On the one hand, they called on the government to accommodate the illegal armed groups, and, on the other, they turned to equally vicious illegal armed groups to solve the problem extra-legally. This only further damaged the perception of the government and its legitimacy. Uribe's focus on the results of actions and obtaining results through modification of State behavior led to increased confidence and positive perception of his government's legitimacy. As a consequence, people increasingly foreswore their backing of illegal methods to deal with the insurgents. This led to the demobilization of the paramilitaries at the national level, although a small number of the former paramilitaries formed new criminal groups (the BACRIM) that continue to exist in some local areas. How results are obtained is also very important. Ensuring that the methodology to obtain results was within the bounds of the law was extremely important to gaining and maintaining legitimacy. This eliminated any question about the legitimacy of the action taken. When actions are seen as legitimate, it opens up room for maneuver and gives the government increasing freedom to act against their enemies, whether this means modifying or interpreting existing law to give greater advantage to government forces.

In the end, the government is legitimate if it is perceived to be. There are two important audiences in this endeavor: the internal national audience and the international community. The most important audience is the national-level audience, because whether a government can govern or not depends on internal perceptions. However, international perceptions are not unimportant because in an interconnected world, official and private external actors can exert a great deal of influence on the national arena through information campaigns and/or resources



Soldiers from Joint Task Force Omega deep in the Caqueta jungle prepare to receive a resupply helicopter, 2006.
Photo: David Spencer.

both for and against a government. These campaigns and resources can be aimed at internal audiences or other external actors that can and do have influence internally. So while winning the internal audience means increased governability and freedom of action, winning legitimacy with the international community at a minimum reduces negative interference in internal affairs. At a maximum it mobilizes international support in international arenas, and even significant external assistance. Also, when external assistance is obtained, having legitimacy reduces the conditioning of that assistance and helps to synchronize government interests with international community interests. Finally, when a government achieves legitimacy, it reduces international interference in the post-conflict restoration process, which can turn government victories into defeats for the security forces, who end up accused, tried, and often jailed despite having won the military conflict.

6. Strategies of negotiations between governments and irregular forces are likely to be unproductive unless both sides share the same general strategic objective. Colombia made multiple attempts to negotiate the end of armed conflict with irregular groups that operated in the country. The government was successful with the AUC, the M-19, Quintin Lame, and portions of the EPL and ELN, but unsuccessful with the core of ELN and FARC. These experiences produced both successes and failures that offer important lessons. The government succeeded when both parties had the same strategic objective in mind—that is, the

demobilization of their armed forces and reincorporation of former combatants into normal civil society. In each case, the organization in question had either been militarily battered, and or had lost their political reason to continue armed confrontation. Negotiations centered on terms of disarmament and reincorporation, not the fundamental purpose of negotiating.

Negotiations that centered on reforming society and politics in attempts to develop relationships of trust with vague notions about eventual demobilization were failures. Three attempts resulting in failure were made with the FARC and the ELN. These organizations used these negotiations to attempt to gain political legitimacy and access to public fora for their ideas, rather than to seek alternative ways other than violence of resolving conflict. What these negotiations did was to inflict political defeats on the party that was most perceived as being responsible for breaking off the negotiations. In this sense, the government suffered a partial defeat from the termination of the first process with the FARC. The second process ended inconclusively with a draw, and the third ended with an overwhelming defeat for the FARC. The problem is that these are outcomes that cannot be planned since, in the end, perception of who is to blame for failure is the deciding factor, and perception cannot be controlled, emerging instead from the public's understanding of actions and reactions by both sides. The public is fickle, and calculating what the other side will do is inherently unscientific. Therefore, although the peace process with the FARC during the Pastrana government resulted in a devastating political defeat for the guerrillas, this was not a planned outcome, but a fortuitous event that was dependent more on the FARC's mistakes than on the government's skill.

7. A strong commitment to human rights does not restrict, but rather enables, freedom of action. The importance of respect for human rights is now a permanent part of any conflict, and is a fundamental way for a government to gain legitimacy with the national and international communities. The Colombian conflict demonstrates the consequences of ignoring human rights concerns, and also the positive outcomes of embracing them as part of the government program. Some governments have perceived human rights as being a non-military weapon of anti-State forces. While it is clear that sometimes anti-State forces manipulate human rights accusations as a weapon against the government, this is usually only the case when a government has underestimated the importance of the topic and either deliberately carried out policies of human rights violations, or simply ignored human rights as an important topic. In Colombia, there was never a State policy, or security forces policy, to violate human rights. However, the security forces were initially slow in responding to accusations of human rights violations as well as in investigating, purging, or punishing members of the institutions that were legitimately accused. Furthermore, the security forces, as well as Colombian society in general, often tolerated so-called paramilitary forces that committed atrocities against civilians accused of

supporting the guerrillas. For many years, body count was the primary measure of effectiveness within the military for winning the war. A small number of unscrupulous individuals within the institutions used this as an excuse to commit abuses for personal gain. This did not mean that Colombian security forces institutionally were in the habit of regularly violating human rights, but rather that some human rights problems existed because of lack of understanding of the importance of the subject and consequent lack of doctrine, training, and methods for dealing with possible human rights abuses. In this manner personnel who did commit abuses were—for several years—able to slip through the cracks in the system, which in turn delegitimized the institutions and gave the State’s enemies ammunition to delegitimize the government. For the armed forces, the consequence of underestimating the importance of human rights was the delegitimization during the Pastrana government of the military justice system and its loss of jurisdiction over all but service-related cases.

This began to change significantly starting in 1998 and has advanced systematically ever since. Human rights complaints against the security forces have correspondingly diminished. When a crisis for the so-called false positives emerged in 2008, Colombians had advanced to such a degree that rather than be derailed by the crisis, the Colombian military was able to embrace and take ownership of the problem. They were able to demonstrate serious commitment to solving the issue by commissioning a study that resulted in new doctrine, training, and procedures, culminating in almost no human rights complaints in 2009–2010. As a result, the enemies of the State were not able to take advantage of the false positives crisis to turn it into a weapon against the government. In this manner, although the 2008 crisis was unfortunate, it did not prove catastrophic. The Colombian military was able to retain its credibility and legitimacy and military operations were not crippled to any significant degree. Being able to demonstrate respect for human rights not only gained the Colombian security institutions legitimacy in the eyes of the national community, but, as importantly, in the eyes of the international community as well. This was critical in terms of obtaining and retaining international political and material support, as it will be important in terms of the post-war demobilization, reduction, and purging of the government forces—although that may not take place for many years.

8. An independent, impartial, and effective justice system is critical to the consolidation of security gains and the removal of the causes of conflict. Captured members of illegal armed groups or those who have deserted often cite the lack or ineffectiveness of justice as one of the primary motivations for their having joined their organizations. Colombia has made a lot of progress in making their justice system more effective. Colombians have attempted to improve their justice system on two levels: first, to make it a more effective tool to combat illegal armed groups; and second, to reform justice as a way to remove causes that generate violence. In this



Special Forces soldiers on a mission. Photo Carlos Ospina.

regard, Colombia has implemented a whole battery of measures to increase its effectiveness, especially against drug trafficking. Its most effective tool has been extradition to the United States and other foreign countries, however. Another major resource has been confiscation of money and goods acquired through the proceeds of illicit businesses. On a second level, Colombia transformed its justice system from an inquisitive system to an accusatory system. The hope is that the accusatory system will result in the resolution of cases more quickly than under the old cumbersome inquisitive system, resulting in greater efficiency, a higher proportion of convictions, and less impunity. The accusatory system is in its initial stages, so there are still significant problems related to the transition from the old to the new system. Institutional deficits relating to rules and capabilities for gathering evidence, procedural errors, and similar problems have caused many cases to be nullified. Since the system is still being worked out, it is still too early to know how effective it will be in Colombia's efforts to improve justice.

9. While counterinsurgency is a useful starting point, doctrine must be expanded and adjusted to accommodate new realities. Traditional counterinsurgency doctrine is focused on political enemies of the State who employ irregular military organizations combined with political mobilization to overthrow the State. Hence, doctrine to counter this threat was very enemy centric, focused on the military organization and tactics of the enemy as well as the neutralizing insurgencies' ability to politically mobilize by advocating the transformation of less-than-democratic political systems to more open and democratic systems. Despite the ferocity of these conflicts, both sides observed certain rules or mores, because essentially the struggle was

between two moral codes. This has been a subset of the Colombian conflict, but the conflict has included other dynamics that made it much broader than this. First, Colombia's irregular threats were not fighting against a closed political system, but rather against a democracy, albeit a weak one. Much of Colombia's problem was about the State's inability to control and administer its own territory, not the endemic failure of its political system. Second, by the 1980s this lack of territorial control spawned multiple irregular threats against the State: insurgents, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers. Furthermore, both the insurgents and the anti-subversive paramilitaries were intermingled with drug trafficking and other criminal enterprises to degrees not seen in previous insurgent conflicts, at least in the hemisphere. Third, significant criminal enterprises, including drug trafficking, introduced a strong economic component into the conflict that became its own reason for being, and intermingled with the political cause of the insurgents and anti-subversives. The conflict then became as much about control of the illegal economies as about political power, particularly at the local level where, in places, control of the illegal economy equated with political power. The enemies of the State not only fought the State for control of these economies, but each other as well, because control of the illegal economy gave a group significant political influence at the national level. Another unique characteristic was that these illegal economies largely flourished in regions that were far from the traditional political and economic centers of power, meaning that previous distributions of forces to provide security were inadequate because the unprecedented scale of the illegal economies made it unnecessary for enemies of the State to control major population and economic centers in order to generate significant levels of political and military power.

This mixture of insurgent, paramilitary, and criminal threats required a concept broader than counterinsurgency. The Colombians called their concept Democratic Security. At its core were two essential tasks: reestablishing security and reinforcing governance. To reestablish security they had to simultaneously confront all of the different threats, each requiring a different approach and a mix of both military and police responses. The military and police tasks boiled down to three essential lines of operation: territorial control, offensive operations, and special operations. The military sometimes carried out traditional police roles, and the police were forced to organize and equip some of their units like the military in order to be able to defend themselves. The determining factor was often not which force was responsible for performing a task, but rather which force had the information and was available to carry out the task. This necessitated a much more flexible concept of roles and missions.

Reinforcing governance at its core meant making democracy work the way it was supposed to in all of the nation's territory. In particular this meant extending essential government services to parts of the country where they had never before existed and reinforcing such social goods as education and justice. It meant building essential infrastructure and developing the economy

to give the inhabitants real alternatives to the illegal economy and membership in the illegal armed groups. When Democratic Security during the first Uribe administration evolved into Democratic Consolidation during his second, there was really no major change of strategy. The same lines of operation within the same two essential tasks continued. Rather there was a change of emphasis. The government prioritized the governance half of the equation, reflecting the great success that the government had experienced in reestablishing security during the first Uribe administration. Consolidation was necessary to make the gains in security permanent. This remains an ongoing task.

Colombia demonstrates that countries facing similar threats need to carry out at least four major essential tasks. These tasks do not necessarily occur sequentially or independent of the others. First, governments need to develop and sustain the political will to develop a correct strategy and sustain this effort to the conclusion of the conflict. Second, governments need to develop strong institutions, both in the security realm and as part of a whole-of-government approach. Third, they need to conduct a security campaign against the irregular threats. Fourth, they need to attack the causes that generate the irregular threats. In this context, the generation of several variables that created popular support for Democratic Security was and always will be a work in progress, and so the strengthening of State presence, the consolidation of democratic culture, improvements in the war against corruption, and fomenting respect for the law, as well as human rights, are just as important as the modernization of security force training, equipment, and operational capabilities.

10. The increasing role of illegal economies is transforming the nature of irregular conflicts.

Illegal economies have transformed irregular conflict. First, governments cannot just defend centers of legal power and legal economy. Second, illegal economies generate enough resources to create parallel power, so governments must defend the traditional centers of power as well as gain control over remote areas, since these are where illegal economies thrive. They cannot focus on destroying enemy structures without going after the illegal economies, because either the same enemy will regenerate or a new irregular enemy will develop, often more resilient and threatening than the last. In Colombia this happened on multiple occasions and at multiple levels: the big cartels were replaced by the mini-cartels, then by guerrillas, and finally by paramilitaries. When the paramilitaries demobilized, remaining ungoverned spaces, or under-governed spaces, were filled by the criminal bands or the BACRIM. In places such as in the Nudo del Paramillo, where paramilitaries disappeared and the BACRIM did not develop, the guerrillas were able to return.

To sum up, the addition of criminal activity is another lesson that needs to be taken into account for the present, not just because of the significant impact it has had on the logistical and operational capabilities of the irregular enemies, but also because of the motivation it provides

the group as well as the prolongation of their will to resist, which increasingly complicate the scenario. In this manner the BACRIM, as well as the FARC and the ELN, has begun carrying out criminal activity purely for economic benefits because it creates a perfect feedback cycle: illicit money→operational capability→local power—which replicates itself continuously. This dynamic and the impact it has means that conflicts can potentially last almost indefinitely, as long as there is national space where illegal economies can be generated, demand for the products and services of the illicit economy remains at least constant, and the business remains profitable. This implies that new-generation irregular conflicts, already prolonged, may now last generations. Governments need to be prepared for this eventuality, as anything less will nearly guarantee inconsistent approaches over several governments and a systematic growth of the problem, instead of steady resolution of these conflicts over the same time. Democracy, with limited electoral periods and in some cases term limits, needs to develop mechanisms to deal with this reality, an urgent need that, if not dealt with, will defeat it.

11. U.S. assistance was most effective when it aligned with a Colombian-developed and Colombian-led strategy. The United States has assisted multiple countries fighting internal irregular threats. Colombia has been a best-case scenario compared to other countries, such as Vietnam, Iraq, or El Salvador. In these countries, the United States essentially had to build institutions from scratch, and as a consequence these countries were dependent on the United States for almost every aspect of their counterinsurgency strategies. This meant that the United States had to pour in relatively large amounts of resources just to create the minimal conditions so the government could resist the offensive action of the insurgencies. Not only did the United States help oversee the creation of armed institutions, it also helped mentor the transition from authoritarian to democratic government, often with significant internal resistance from the political and economic establishment of the country it was trying to assist. In all three cases, a type of unhealthy relationship developed in which the local establishments realized that U.S. strategic interests were such that it had to tolerate certain levels of bad behavior, because the United States would not walk away, even if it wanted to. Therefore, as far as they could resist the changes demanded by the United States and avoid being cut off, they did.

In Colombia, U.S. strategic interests were not affected the same way. The United States could walk away from Colombia, as could Colombia walk away from the United States. This put much more of the onus on the Colombians to make their own decisions and reforms. In fact, it was because the United States did not initially come to Colombia's aid, at least in terms of combating the guerrillas, that Colombia developed its own strategies and reforms of the military institution. The reliance of the police on U.S. assistance to combat drug trafficking helps explain why police reform began more than five years before the military reform. This



Colombian marines patrolling the river near San Vicente del Caguán in 2009. Photo: David Spencer.

relative independence translated into a much more constructive relationship since Colombia could, and in many cases did, make both the strategic and even successful tactical decisions, and so at a much reduced cost to the interested parties. U.S. assistance was most productive when U.S. and Colombian interests most closely coincided, producing a synergy between the two. This was a process that developed over time. Initially the United States was interested only in combating narcotics, while Colombia was more interested in combating the guerrillas. Synergy developed when both sides came to an understanding that, due to the interconnected nature of the threats, their best interests were served by supporting the objectives of the other. This happened over several years, as the two countries worked closely together and developed relationships of mutual trust and respect. It did not mean that conflicts and misunderstandings did not occur, or that interests coincided 100 percent, but it did mean that the baseline relationship of mutual respect made it easier to come to an agreement when differences and conflicts did arise.

12. Lack of regional cooperation may jeopardize the consolidation of success against irregular groups. The lack of cooperation of Colombia's neighbors to combat the guerrillas and drug trafficking organizations is one of the key factors allowing the prolongation of the conflict. The transnational reach and the lack of ability to affect the capacities and decisions of other actors offer an important lesson. Just as occurred in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, the presence of other governmental and nongovernmental actors that provide refuge, cover, support and/or

survival, and regeneration capacity to the irregular groups means that in some ways Colombia will be subject to permanent economic and political attrition because it will not be able to translate its military predominance into a permanent solution.

13. Internal irregular conflicts are not static, but constantly changing. The Colombian context demonstrates that internal, irregular conflict is always evolving. The lessons learned today may well be largely irrelevant if one of the major lessons is not kept in mind: that the conflict is dynamic, and constantly mutates. Inertia and conformity are some of the worst possible attitudes that can be adopted. On the other hand, the long-term solution requires permanent adaptation and transformation. As each side adapts, the other side adapts to counter it. We have seen that the Colombian military forces changed their paradigm and transformed their doctrine, operations, and technology to achieve previously unimagined objectives. There was a similar political transformation, with leaders assuming new roles to solve problems. Expeditionary government became a tremendous force multiplier in terms of generated public trust and reducing the operational freedom of the irregulars' threats. The insurgent forces adopted new technologies and developed a defense in depth beyond the national borders, generating a quasi-continental problem. That said, the insurgents initially failed to recognize the evolution of their adversary and lost sight of their macro concept, the strategic axis of their project to take power summarized in the term "all forms of struggle." The abandonment of the legal political struggle and the reliance on armed struggle as the predominant form of struggle allowed the military forces to fix and attack an adversary that had become uni-dimensional. Keeping in mind the postulate of ever-evolving insurgent forces, FARC has perceived the problem and is trying to learn from its mistakes, looking for ways to overcome its military defeat and the death of its top leaders by building an extra-national support network through illicit activities, as well as to reappear in the political arena, not only at the national level but also in the international arena. Ultimate institutional success will depend on whether the government forces will be able to anticipate and adapt to these attempts, neutralizing the efforts of the other side.

Operational Lessons

Seven main lessons can be drawn from the Colombian operational experience. The Colombian government developed three lines of operations for the security forces: (a) gaining and retaining territorial control; (b) sustained offensive operations; and (c) special operations against high-value targets.



Weapons and ammunition captured from FARC, Guaviare province. Photo: Carlos Ospina.

14. A key factor in regaining territorial control and gaining the strategic offensive was the implementation of permanent, sustained offensive operations. The Colombian conflict demonstrates the need for seizing and maintaining the strategic and tactical offensive. It is not enough in internal irregular conflicts to defend and secure the population. The enemies of the State find ways of defeating or neutralizing defensive measures. Although defensive measures must be combined with offensive action, it can't be any offensive action. Sporadic or periodic offensive action that seeks to inflict losses or disrupt enemy activity might produce results, but those results are only temporary. They do not permanently disrupt the enemy's ability to project strategic power against the government. The enemy learns to adapt to government offensive action of this nature, and as long as they retain control of the terrain, particularly terrain that allows them to benefit from illegal markets, they can quickly recover their losses. It was only when Colombia developed the capability to carry out sustained offensive operations that permanently recovered terrain; permanently disrupted enemy communications, logistics, and maneuver; and denied the enemy's ability to exploit illegal markets that the strategic initiative was seized from the enemy and their power significantly weakened. Maintaining the manpower, logistics, and mobility requirements to sustain this capability has been a critical element of Colombia's success and will remain critical to the successful outcome of the conflict.

15. Robust mobility is key to recovering territorial control. To be able to dominate national space, mobility is vital to project and sustain force as well as government. In Colombia, due to the broken national terrain and huge physical space, this mobility has been enabled by aircraft and, to a lesser extent, by riverine craft.

Developing the helicopter wings of the police, air force, and army was particularly critical to the ability of the Colombian military to regain territorial control, and success on the battlefield correlated to the strength and availability of their helicopter resources. The helicopter arm provided three critical staple capabilities: force maneuver, through the ability to land significant operational forces anywhere in national territory when and where they were required; sustainment, through the ability to resupply and reinforce combat forces on the ground over prolonged periods; and casualty evacuation, through the ability to evacuate the wounded in a timely manner.

Besides the helicopter air arm, air mobility was enhanced through the development of a robust cargo aircraft fleet, both within the forces and through the hiring of contractors. This fleet was vital to moving troops and materiel in large quantities from training and marshalling centers to forward operating bases from which the helicopter air arm was able to support tactical operations.

Riverine forces also proved vital because in the remote areas of Colombia, rivers are the local highways. Guerrillas, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers rely on the rivers for the movement of forces and logistics. The development and expansion of the riverine program gave the military forces the capability of controlling this vital route and disrupting enemy mobility while enhancing their own.

16. Close air support was an important strategic force multiplier. A second related capability has been close air support. Close air support has been the major advantage enjoyed by the Colombian government forces over the irregular forces they face. Close air support has played both critical defensive and offensive roles. Defensively, the ability to prevent the overrunning of a police station or to beat off the ambush of an army patrol was often dependent on the speed with which close air support aircraft could be sent to reinforce the garrison or the affected patrol. By 2006, the increased close air support capabilities of the Colombian air force was largely responsible for completely shutting down the enemy's capability to carry out offensive operations. Offensively, close air support neutralized the enemy's attempts to prevent government maneuver. It also softened up and neutralized enemy defensive positions during advances. Finally, precision-guided munitions that arrived on the battlefield in 2007 played a critical role in terms of carrying out successful operations against enemy leadership, known as high-value targets, or HVTs.

17. While HUMINT was critical, SIGINT, IMINT, and technological improvements enhanced quality and allowed the creation of operational and strategic intelligence.

Colombia found that intelligence was key to effectively combating irregular threats. For a long time, however, Colombia suffered significant intelligence failures. One of the most glaring was the penetration of Colombian intelligence by their irregular foes, which occurred at two levels: at the operational and tactical level, where irregular organizations were able to bribe key individuals to pass them information of interest; and at the strategic level, where sympathetic or paid-off politicians let the enemies of the State know of any upcoming operations against them. This created suspicion and mistrust, resulting in the further hampering of intelligence. At the strategic political level, there was little communication or trust between security forces' intelligence and Colombia's civilian politicians, resulting in the civilians having little understanding about the nature of the threats against the State. Many of the well-meaning but misguided policies carried out at this time were due to lack of understanding of the threat. At the strategic and operational level, the intelligence tended to be historical, since it wasn't passed until it had lost its actionable value. Even at the tactical level, intelligence was conducted in great secrecy among a small cell within the unit staffs, for fear that other members of the staff were on the payroll of armed anti-State organizations. As a consequence, actionable intelligence tended to be of little more than tactical value, and the expectations for results from operations on that intelligence was low because extensive briefings, training, and rehearsal increased the likelihood of a leak.



Air Force helicopter demonstrates a soldier rescue operation. Photo Alejandro Arbeláez.

The best intelligence came from multiple sources. HUMINT was probably the most importance source. However, IMINT, and SIGINT were also critical in terms of initiating, confirming, or updating HUMINT information. Two major accomplishments significantly enhanced the ability of Colombia to take advantage of the intelligence these were collecting. First, the development of a secure network by which intelligence could be shared instantly from remote areas of the country to the center. Where Colombia had long been able to create actionable tactical intelligence, this capability made it possible for them to share information so that actionable operational and even strategic intelligence could be generated. The second major development was inter-agency intelligence fusion. The sharing of intelligence among the police, the armed forces, and the civilian intelligence agencies has been a key component of Colombia's ability to locate, kill, or capture enemy HVTs. The ability to share the intelligence and to trust that it will remain secure have been important steps in this process. However, inter-agency intelligence sharing is still relatively new and only standard in the HVT operations. There are still significant obstacles at other levels.

18. Taking out strategic enemy leadership targets is important, but is not the center of gravity of enemy forces. The U.S. interpretation of Clausewitzian conventional war strategy often tries to identify the enemy's center of gravity: that which gives cohesion to the enemy and which, if lost or disrupted, will cause armed opposition forces to unravel. Many have argued that the enemy center of gravity in Colombia is the leadership of the various organizations. These same proponents have argued that government efforts should be focused on these leadership targets, called high-value targets or HVTs. While Colombia was able to capture or kill some HVTs before 2008, it was really after the beginning of that year that an impressive number of HVTs were killed or captured. In March 2008, three of the seven members of the secretariat—Raul Reyes, Ivan Rios, and Manuel Marulanda of the FARC—died or were killed directly and indirectly due to government action. In September 2010, the government was able to kill Mono Jojoy, another member of the Secretariat and acknowledged military leader of the FARC. Expectations that the FARC would collapse were not met, however, nor did a significant number of the organization desert. What role, then, do operations against HVTs play in the conflict? Have the efforts been in vain? By analyzing the various operations and successes against HVTs we can say the following: The capturing or killing of HVTs has been more effective at disrupting criminal organizations than against insurgent or paramilitary organizations. This is because criminal organizations are often built around individuals or groups of individuals that are in the organization for articulated personal gain. Because of this, when key individuals have been taken out, the particular organization in question has collapsed. This happened with the Medellin cartel, the Cali cartel, a number of smaller drug-trafficking organizations, and several of the current criminal gangs

known as BACRIM. However, in no case did drug trafficking diminish, nor did drug trafficking organizations disappear. Instead these groups adapted and continued their activity because neither did the demand diminish nor was the profitability of the activity significantly curtailed.

The loss of HVTs did not cause the collapse of any of the guerrilla organizations or paramilitaries, as was the case with the purely criminal drug trafficking organizations. In fact, despite the significant leadership losses, there are signs that both major guerrilla organizations, the FARC and the ELN, are making attempts to regain their former strength. Leadership losses have been replaced, and the new leadership has vowed to continue to stay the course. The paramilitary organizations demobilized, and many of the leadership are now in jail as part of the outcome of this demobilization. The demobilization was not due to government action, however, but rather to the loss of legitimacy owing to the success of democratic security policy and the desire of the paramilitaries to cut favorable deals with the State while they could. At the same time, the remobilization of largely new organizations filling some of the same voids left behind indicates a transformation of some of the former paramilitaries, combined with additional elements into the BACRIM. In this sense, it cannot be said that the killing or capture of HVTs has been effective in terms of impacting the center of gravity of these organizations. So what are operations against HVTs good for?

The experience in Colombia indicates that the killing and capture of HVTs serves two important purposes. First, they are important political symbols. Societies need important benchmarks to maintain their support for expensive security policies. Being able to display captured or killed HVTs sends an important message to the population, to the legal forces, and to international allies that a government is successful and that it is serious about combating its enemies. Conversely, the successful attacks are morale blows to the enemy that certainly impact its will to continue the fight.

Second, leaders are not formed overnight, so the sustained loss of significant numbers of leaders impacts the ability of armed opponents to fight and to adapt to the government strategy. The more leaders that can be taken out, and, particularly, the more successive leaders can be taken out, the more the government will disrupt the ability of the enemy to maintain its effectiveness and cohesion. Certainly, as the Colombian government was able to kill and capture successive Medellin and Cali cartel leadership, it was able to disrupt the organizations' hold on Colombian society and politics, which in turn facilitated the adoption of increasingly effective measures against the organization, as well as giving people the courage to stand up to the cartels. Where in the 1980s the drug cartels had thoroughly penetrated government, the security forces, and the private sector, by 2010 the penetration of the drug trafficking organizations had been greatly diminished. The impact of the loss of FARC and ELN HVTs has been similar, diminishing their level of control and penetration of the guerrilla organizations

over Colombian society and pushing them to a more cautious and defensive posture. However, this begs the question of whether the killing and capturing of HVTs is a cause or an outcome of enemy weakness. Although democratic security began producing results by the end of 2002, it was not really until 2008 that a succession of HVTs began to fall. While some of this may be related to capabilities that became available at that time, it is also a product of systematic advances by the security forces under the Uribe strategy. The security forces' strategy was based on three pillars: area control, offensive operations, and special operations against high-value targets. As the government established area control and conducted sustained offensive operations, it systematically and dramatically reduced the enemies' space of domination, maneuver, and communications. As the irregular organizations came under constant military pressure, the leadership became increasingly vulnerable to government special operations. It is no accident that the succession of spectacular HVT strikes began just less than six years after the start of democratic security policy. In this sense the six years leading up to this point can be regarded as a prolonged period of preparation of the battle space. The HVT victories can be regarded as the outcome of the systematic weakening of the enemy, rather than the cause of that weakening. It follows then that the more important and effective operations have been area control and sustained offensive operations. Therefore, these "bread and butter" operations logically should be the priority and get the lion's share of the resources, even though they have less political impact. The HVT strikes help consolidate those gains morally and politically.

19. Well-regulated and controlled local forces are vital to abet government strategy. Uncontrolled, unregulated, and unofficial local forces can unhinge government efforts.

Paramilitaries, militias, civil defense forces, and local forces have been considered vital components of counterinsurgency strategy to defend and control local terrain. This was confirmed in Colombia. During the Uribe administration, the military developed a matrix of forces to exercise territorial control. First, it recruited approximately 16,000 local young men into peasant soldier—later renamed "village soldier"—platoons. The village soldier platoons were young men who were recruited into the regular army and then performed their national service in their home towns. Second, it designated a similar number of regular army platoons to back up and support each village soldier platoon. Third, the police created the *carabiniero* program, composed of companies of approximately 100 policemen assigned to patrol the rural areas near the villages, prevent criminal activity in those vicinities, and act as quick reinforcements in the case of attack. Fourth, the Colombian government recruited approximately four million people into what it called the cooperators' network. This network provided information to the government on criminal and guerrilla activities, location, and movements. If this resulted in significant kills and captures, the government offered cash payments, which



Mobile Brigade soldiers preparing to board helicopters at Tolemaida training base. Photo: Colombian Army.

in turn motivated people to provide additional information. This matrix successfully terminated guerrilla attacks on towns, disrupting logistics, recruitment, kidnapping, extortion, sabotage, and armed propaganda. (Attacking towns, kidnapping, extorting, and sabotaging infrastructure near towns, such as bridges and electrical towers, events that could be easily reported on—filmed and photographed—by the press, was an important way to communicate that the guerrillas were on the offensive and winning. Terminating those attacks was an important way of showing that the government was winning.)

One of the greatest contributing factors to the instability in Colombia was the lack of government control at the local level, particularly in the small towns and rural areas. This allowed all sorts of criminal enterprises and anti-State groups to compete with the State in the attempt to assert themselves over the local population, including drug traffickers, guerrillas, and paramilitaries. The security situation was restored to the degree that the State was able to reassert its control of the small towns and rural areas. Local security forces were an important element in this effort. The creation of local security forces does a number of positive things. First, as already mentioned, it helps reassert government authority in local areas. Second, it empowers the local population to participate in its own defense. Third, by empowering the local population, a mutual obligation is developed with the central government. Finally, local forces are often very effective because they are intimately familiar with the local terrain and, in this manner, know all of the best locations for attack, defense, approach, withdrawal, and hiding. They can provide

information to national forces that will increase the effectiveness of their operations. Colombia's ability to maintain security will depend on its ability to maintain and manage its local forces network.

The situation in Colombia also demonstrates what can happen when local forces get out of control. What became the paramilitaries were originally formed legally, but it would seem without a clear plan or resources. As a result, the regulation of these groups was not clear, and as a consequence they were easily susceptible to private interests and influences. They quickly became subsumed to criminal interests, drug trafficking, extortion, and other rackets. Without a clear mission, controls, or guidelines they began to commit terrible atrocities. While they may have prevented the advance of the guerrillas in certain strategic areas, such as eastern Antioquia, the Middle Magdalena, and Uraba, strategically they delegitimized the government, ruining its international reputation and ceding the moral high ground to the guerrillas. They also impeded the government from creating or implementing legitimate civilian self-defense programs. While Colombia did end up creating local defense forces, these were integral parts of the armed forces and the police. Only the cooperators' networks involved civilians, and only through the provision of information. All other activities were precluded. The illegitimacy of the paramilitaries meant that the government could not implement the most cost-effective civilian self-defense programs, instead having to create very expensive regular army and regular police local forces in order to guarantee their control and regulation. This raises two issues. First, the success of



Colombian Mobile Brigade Troops raise flag at Marquetalia, Tolima, birthplace of the FARC. Photo: Colombian Army.

the village soldiers and the failure of the paramilitaries indicate that local defense forces in the new war paradigm, no matter what form they take, must first have a very clear and specific purpose as part of a strategic plan. Second, they must be highly regulated and controlled to ensure that they are not corrupted by illegal economies or used for illegitimate purposes, such as the persecution of supporters of legal opposition political parties, or to carry out extra-judicial killings. Finally, the experience in Colombia begs the question of whether traditional, civilian defense forces, such as those organized in Cold War counterinsurgency campaigns, are even feasible. Certainly civilians can be organized and armed, but the question is whether, in the current environment, the risk of illegal economy corruption or the political consequence and possibility of committing an abuse is so high that it makes this form of local defense force obsolete? Colombia illustrates both the value and the risks.

20. Whole-of-government follow-up is vital to consolidate gains in security. In theory, seizing terrain from the State's enemies through sustained offensive operations, and then standing up local security forces to retain that territory under government control should be followed by development. Development in Colombia has involved not just economic activity but also the establishment of government services for the first time in some cases, restoring them in others, and reinforcing them in yet others. This includes the establishment of government services such as health, education, access to credit, national identification, potable water, electrical infrastructure, communications infrastructure, and so forth. Carrying out development is supposed to address the causes that motivate people to participate in illegal economies or in irregular armed groups. It is supposed to make the government and legal society the people's recourse for solving the multiple problems that arise. Colombia has taken development seriously and identified several priority areas for development in the wake of security operations to recover territory for the government. Colombia developed a coordination committee under a trusted adviser who reported directly to the president. As a result of this direct relationship with the president, the coordination committee was able to mobilize resources for development in the priority areas.

Four problems still remain, however. First, not enough time has passed to show whether or not development efforts have proven successful. Second, more areas require development than the amount of resources that have been assigned for these purposes. Third, some of the areas that have been recovered by the government are not fit for any economy other than narcotics or other illegal economies. Finally, development is a long-term effort requiring a sustained commitment. This has yet to occur, and it is unclear yet how sustained the development effort will be, since it seems to be dependent on the priority assigned to it by successive leaders.



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