



COLOMBIA ALERT Plan Colombia: An Interim Assessment Gabriel Marcella

Overview

- Plan Colombia was based on the strategic theory that economic development, security and peace are directly linked.
- The plan was not conceived as a military strategy, but early on, the strength and performance of the armed forces have made the greatest strides.
- Pentagon strategists argue that the best way to strengthen democracy and eliminate the drug scourge is to assist the military and police in establishing territorial control.
- On the narcotics front-the focus of U.S. interest-the plan achieved early major success in the first year with coca eradication. Performance should be higher this year following the arrival of additional helicopter support.
- The Achilles heel of the program's southern campaign is insufficient support for the government's alternative development program.

September 11, 2001, reshaped international relations and had profound impact on the strategic equation in Colombia. The challenge of "draining the swamp" and going after terrorism with global links resonated deeply in Bogotá and among the insurgents: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), National Liberation Army (ELN), and paramilitaries. Although these already had already been on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations, they now formed part of a broader international threat assessment. Two weeks into 2002, the ill conceived "peace process" begun with the FARC in 1999 was resuscitated at the last minute. President Andrés Pastrana, "risking all for peace," went as far as he could for three years, with nothing to show for it other than frustration and virtual surrender to the FARC of national sovereignty over a demilitarized zone (*despeje*) the size of Switzerland. On January 20, under the auspices of United Nations representative James Lemoyne and the support of the Catholic Church and 10 "friendly countries" (Canada, Cuba, Spain, France, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Venezuela) the two sides reached a new agreement to extend negotiations for the cease fire until April 7, 2002.

Frustrations with the peace process and the post-September 11 international environment underscored an important reality: FARC and ELN were further delegitimized at home and abroad. Their claims to a political agenda of reform and social justice stood in naked contrast to their campaigns of assassination, kidnapping, extortion, indiscriminate attack against civilian populations, forced recruitment of child soldiers, direct involvement in promoting and deeply benefiting from the drug trade, inflicting ecological damage, and even developing a training link between the Irish Republican Army and the FARC (three IRA explosives experts were caught after leaving the *despeje*).

Plan Colombia

These events serve as a dramatic backdrop for an early assessment of the impact of the multiyear Plan Colombia. The strategic theory behind Plan Colombia is very simple: economic development, security, and peace are directly linked. The central premise is that drug money feeds the coffers of the guerrillas, whose attacks give rise to self-defense organizations-the paramilitaries. If the narco money goes away, the guerrillas cannot mount the ambitious military campaigns against Colombia's state and society, and they become less threatening. Moreover, Carlos Castaño's paramilitaries have less reason for being. Thus the prospects for bringing the guerrillas and the paramilitaries to the table for serious peace negotiations are enhanced. Additionally, as the armed threat to the state and society is eliminated, the

forces of public order (police and military) can regain effective control of the national territory and more easily eliminate the scourge of illegal narcotics. Security will allow the rule of law to be established.

Plan Colombia (the full title: *Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State*) endeavors to strengthen the state, reenergize an economy with 18-20 percent unemployment, reduce production and trafficking, and restore civil society. Contrary to the opinion of many nongovernmental organizations and the media, Plan Colombia is not a military strategy. The military component is one of 10 elements of a grand strategy designed to remake the nation into a secure democracy free from violence and corruption.

Security

What are the early returns? Following a classical pattern witnessed in other internal wars since 1945, the greatest strides have been made in the strength and performance of the armed forces. As recently as 1998, FARC beat the Colombian Army in battalion-size engagements. Now the Army is bigger (52,000 professional soldiers out of nearly 117,000), and much better led, organized, trained, motivated, and equipped. General Fernando Tapias, commanding general of the Armed Forces, and Army commander General Jorge Mora Rangel, with the support of the defense minister have transformed the Army into a more mobile, more aggressive, and more formidable fighting force. Its Rapid Deployment Force (*Fuerza de Despliegue Rapida*) conducted some very successful operations in 2001, including "Gato Negro," which captured the notorious Brazilian drug lord, Fernandinho (who was trading money and arms for cocaine with the FARC). Joint planning and operations, which were incipient, came into being and have improved. Yet, the military has much to do before it achieves the size and proficiency required for sustained success. The top force multipliers for any military organization are leadership, tactical mobility, intelligence, and quality of troops. Logistical support, quick reaction, aggressive small unit operations, and better relations with the civilian population must complement these assets. In human rights, the Army has dramatically reduced the number of violators from within the ranks, though collaboration with paramilitaries remains a serious issue.

Classical counterinsurgency doctrine would demand that Colombia achieve a 10 to 1 advantage of its armed forces over the 20,000-25,000 guerrillas, plus an estimated 8,000 paramilitaries. This would require doubling the Army's size, an achievement that would allow the Army to simultaneously conduct operations, defend infrastructure and communications, and establish better *presencia* nationwide. Currently, the Army cannot hold territory it regains because it must constantly redeploy. To expand the Army to its necessary size, the Colombian Congress and leadership elites must do something totally novel in their nation's history: give enough resources to the military to do the job as part of a coherent national political-economic-military strategy. This will require a veritable revolution in civil-military relations and the implementation of obligatory universal military service, a proposal that the executive sent to Congress in late 2001. Colombians can take heart that one of the reasons that the FARC returned to the "peace process" on January 14 and 20 and agreed to extend the cease fire was the new operational capability of the Army, which allowed Pastrana to negotiate from a position of strength rather than weakness.

U.S. Policy: From Counternarcotics to?

Long before September 11, U.S. policy carefully delineated the boundary between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. Mindful of the absence of support at home for counterinsurgency, President Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's administrations scrupulously hewed to a policy of supporting with military and economic assistance only the effort to eradicate narcotics. Although this practice recognized the political reality in the United States, in view of the inescapable reality that the insurgents and the paramilitaries profit from and promote the narcotics economy, it seriously stretched intellectual and operational credibility. Moreover, military strategists in the Pentagon argue quite persuasively that the best way to strengthen democracy and more rapidly eliminate the drugs scourge is to assist the Colombian military and police to establish territorial control in order to be more effective in counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics operations. This would require a more comprehensive package of military assistance than one merely focused on narcotics suppression and interdiction. Such a policy would also render the United States a more effective voice on human rights and would eliminate the artificiality of requiring, for example, that Black Hawk and Huey helicopters be used only for counternarcotics purposes. Providing the means to recover control of national territory and thereby provide public security would remove the principal *raison d'etre* of the paramilitaries: the absence of legitimate security provided by the state. Ambassador Anne Patterson, by stating after September 11 that "Plan Colombia is the basis of our counterterrorist strategy" appeared to be pushing U.S. policy in this direction.

The Southern Campaign

The second area of progress is the core of the U.S. investment: the counternarcotics drive in southern Colombia, notably Putumayo. The United States has helped equip and train Colombian Army units (battalion- and brigade-size) to support the police to eliminate coca plants and destroy the infrastructure of support for drug trafficking (e.g., laboratories, airstrips). These efforts have achieved important successes: more than 30,000 hectares of coca fields had been sprayed by May

2001 (using glyphosate, i.e. *Roundup*) and manual eradication by peasants had voluntarily put more than 10,000 hectares out of production, plus countless labs had been destroyed. Whether these achievements are permanent depends on a number of interrelated variables: the completeness of the eradication program, the ability for the government to enforce the new regime, and the level of support for alternative development (growing other crops, providing access roads, markets, seeds, capital, schools, medical service, and police protection) to wean away the mom and pop *campesino* growers. Eliminating the large plantation-size coca fields should be easier in 2002 when Colombia receives the full complement of spray planes dedicated to the effort.

The Achilles heel of the southern campaign is insufficient support for the government's alternative development program. According to Nathan Christie, an expert at the Department of State, "well-financed alternative development programs will be required to transform eradication's ability to reduce cultivation into more permanent gains." As with everything, much depends on the ability of Bogotá to establish the permanent presence of the state in areas that have traditionally lacked governmental control. Security is the strategic *sine qua non* for Plan Colombia.

Conclusion

Although improvements in the military and in narcotics eradication are easily quantifiable, other elements, such as rebuilding institutions like the judicial system, are less so. Revitalizing the economy also depends on reestablishing a climate of security and predictability for investments. Despite frustrations, Pastrana has established an excellent foundation for his successor. Plan Colombia is both a conceptual framework and a call for collective action by Colombians and by the international community, the coresponsible parties in the production and consumption of narcotics. Moreover, a consensus is emerging that the post-September 11 world has less tolerance for the duplicity of criminals who mask as liberators.

1. For this perspective see the excellent fieldwork of Nathaniel Baker Christie, *Bursting the "Balloon": Aerial Eradication and Illicit Coca Cultivation in Colombia*, M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, May 2001. Baker, who works in the Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Legal Matters, conducted on-site research in Putumayo.

2. Christie, p. 107.

About the Author

Dr. Gabriel Marcella teaches strategy at the U.S. Army War College. He has published extensively on Latin American security issues and is currently researching a book on Colombia and U.S. policy. The views expressed are those of the author and do not represent the policy of the United States Government or CSIS.

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