



THE GEO-POLITICS OF PLAN COLOMBIA

The U.S. multi-track policy of military confrontation (Plan Colombia) via the state apparatus and paramilitary forces in Colombia, diplomatic and political pressure via elites in civil society in Venezuela, political economic co-optation of the Ecuadorean executive define the complex pattern of intervention.

The geo-politics of Plan Colombia

By James Petras

Introduction

Plan Colombia, to be understood properly, should be located in a historical perspective both with relation to Colombia as well as in relation to the recent conflicts in Central America. Plan Colombia is both "new" policy and a continuation of past U.S. involvement in Colombia. Beginning in the early 1960s, under President Kennedy, Washington launched its counter insurgency program, forming special forces, designed to attack "internal enemies. The target was the self-defense communities in Colombia, particularly in Marquetalia and subsequently with greater or lesser intensity, the Pentagon continued its presence in Colombia. Plan Colombia thus is President Clinton's extension and deepening of President Kennedy's internal war. The differences between the earlier version of the internal war doctrine and the current is found in the ideological justifications for U.S. intervention, the scale and scope of U.S. involvement and the regional context of the intervention. Under Kennedy counter-insurgency was based on the threat of international communism, today the justification is based on the drug threat. In both instances there is total denial of the historical-sociological basis of the conflict. The second major

difference between Clinton's Plan Colombia and Kennedy's counter-insurgency program is the scale and scope of intervention. Plan Colombia is a long term billion dollar program involving large scale modern arms shipments. Kennedy's counter-insurgency agenda was much smaller. The difference in the scale of military operation is not because of any strategic or political difference; the cause is found in the different political context in Colombia and the world: in the 1960s the guerrillas were a small isolated group; today they are a formidable army operating on a national scale. Kennedy was concentrating militarily on Indo-China, today Washington has a relatively free hand. Plan Colombia is thus both a continuation and any escalation of U.S. politico-military policy based on similar strategic goals, adapted to new global realities. The second historical factor that needs to be taken into account in discussing Plan Colombia is the recent regional conflicts, namely the U.S. intervention in Central America. Plan Colombia is heavily influenced by Washington's successful reassertion of hegemony in Central America following the so-called "peace accords. Washington's success in Central America is based on the use of state terror, mass displacement of population, large-scale and long-term military spending, military advisors and the offer of a political settlement involving the reincorporation of the guerrilla commanders into electoral politics. Washington's Plan Colombia is based on its success in Central America and its belief that it can replicate the same outcome in Colombia. Washington believes it can repeat the terror for peace formula of Central America via Plan Colombia in the Andean country.

What follows is an analysis of the geo-political interests and ideological concerns that guide Plan Colombia, the consequences of U.S. military escalation and a critique of Washington's mis-diagnosis of the "Colombian question. The essay will conclude with a discussion of some of the adverse unanticipated consequences that Washington may incur in pursuing its military policy in Colombia.

Plan Colombia and the Radical Triangle

Plan Colombia is essentially described by its critics as a U.S. authored and promoted policy directed toward militarily eliminating the guerrilla forces in Colombia and repressing the rural peasant communities which support them. U.S. policymakers describe Plan Colombia as an effort to eradicate drug production and trade by attacking the sources of production which are located in areas of guerrilla influence or control. Since the guerrillas, are associated with the coca producing regions, this line of argument proceeds, Washington has directed its military advisory teams and military aid to destroying what they dub the "narco guerrillas. More recently particularly with the political and military successes of the two major guerrilla movements the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), Washington has increasingly acknowledged the fact that its war is directed against at what is now dubbed the guerrilla insurgency.

While the economic stakes are substantial in Colombia, for both Washington and the ruling oligarchy in Bogota, the larger and more important issue in the rapid and massive build-up U.S. military involvement in Columbia is geopolitical. Strategists in Washington are concerned with several key geo-political issues, which could adversely affect U.S. imperial power in the region and beyond. The Colombian insurgency question is part of a geopolitical matrix which is in the process of challenging and modifying U.S. hegemony in northern South America and in the Panama Canal Zone. Secondly, the oil factor production, supply and prices is linked to the challenge in the region and beyond (in OPEC, Mexico, etc.). Thirdly, the core conflicts with the empire are found in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador (the radical triangle) but there is growing leftist and nationalist discontent in key adjoining countries, particularly in Brazil and Peru. Fourthly, the example of successful resistance in the radical triangle countries is already resonating with countries further south Paraguay, Bolivia on the basis of the successful political struggles by the peasant-Indian movements in the Ecuadorean highlands or by the "Bolivarian appeals" of Venezuela's President Chaves to the ever present national-populist consciousness in Argentina. Fifthly, the strength of the radical triangle, but particularly the oil diplomacy and independent policy of President Chaves has shattered the U.S. strategy of isolating the Cuban revolution and further integrated Cuba into the regional economy. Beyond that, President Chaves'

favorable oil deals (trade at subsidized prices) has strengthened the resolve of the Caribbean and Central American regimes to resist Washington's efforts to turn the Caribbean into an exclusive U.S. lake. While the guerrillas and popular movements represent a serious political and social challenge to U.S. supremacy in the region, Venezuela represents a diplomatic and political economic challenge in the Caribbean basin and beyond, via its leadership in OPEC and its non-aligned foreign policy. In more general terms, the radical triangle can contribute to undermining the mystique surrounding the invincibility of U.S. hegemony and the notion of the inevitability of free market ideology. In more specific terms the conflict between the radical triangle and U.S. imperial power focuses attention on the fact that much of what is described as "globalism" rests on the foundations of the social relations of production and the balance of class forces in the nation-state. The recognition of this fact has particular relevance to the U.S.-FARC conflict in Colombia. The assumption here is that without solid social, political and military foundations within the nation-state, the imperial enterprise and its accompanying global networks are imperiled. Thus there is a need to look rather closely at the nature of its proxy war in Colombia in which Washington through its client regime attempts to destroy the guerrillas and decimate and demoralize their supporters in order to restore the local foundations of imperial power.

The Geography of the Challenge to Washington In the 1960s and 1970s the challenge to U.S. imperial power was located in the Southern Cone of Latin America—namely Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia. Washington responded by backing military coups and state terror in overthrowing governments and terrorizing the popular opposition into submission. During the 1980s, Central America became the centerpiece of revolutionary challenge to U.S. imperial power. Revolution in Nicaragua, popular guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Guatemala, posed a serious challenge to U.S. client regimes and geo-political-economic interests. Washington militarized the region by pouring billions in arms in financing a mercenary army in Nicaragua and state terrorist military activity in El Salvador and Guatemala. The war of attrition waged by Washington eventually imposed a series of peace accords which restored U.S.

client regimes and U.S. hegemony at the cost of over 200,000 deaths in Guatemala, 75,000 in El Salvador and at least 50,000 in Nicaragua.

In the late 1990s and into the new millennium, the geography of resistance to the U.S. empire has shifted to northern South America - namely Colombia, Eastern highlands of Ecuador and Venezuela. In Colombia, the combined guerrilla forces control or influence a wide swathe of territory south of Bogota toward the Ecuadorean border, northwest toward Panama and in several pockets to the east and west of the capital, in addition to urban militia units. Parallel to the guerrilla movement, large scale peasant mobilizations and trade union convoked general strikes have increasingly shaken the Pastrana regime. In Venezuela the Chavez leadership has won several elections, reformed state institutions (Congress, Constitution, Judiciary) and taken an independent position in foreign policy – leading OPEC to higher oil prices, developing ties with Iraq, extending diplomatic and commercial links with Cuba etc. In Ecuador a powerful Indian-peasant movement (CONAIE) linked with lower military officials and trade unionists toppled the Noboa regime in January of 1999 and while the military intervened to topple the popular junta, CONAIE and its allies were able to sweep the subsequent legislative elections in the Ecuadorean sierra. As a result, the Pentagon's military strategy of encircling the Colombian guerrillas by building a military base in Ecuador (Manta) has come under serious attack. In all three countries the armed and civilian movements and the Chavez regime have called into question Washington's interventionism and its promotion of the neo-liberal economic agenda.

The resistance in these three countries takes place in a region which is oil rich; Venezuela is a major U.S. supplier, Colombia is a producer state and has substantial untapped reserves, as is the case on a lesser scale for Ecuador. Thus the oil issue is a two edge sword; a stimulus for an aggressively interventionist U.S. policy (like the Colombian Plan, the intervention against the Ecuadorean popular junta) and a lever of power in challenging U.S. domination, as Chavez has demonstrated. Plan Colombia cannot be extrapolated from the geo-economic matrix of the oil rich triangle of northern South America, a strategic resource to fuel the empire as well as an economic resource allowing nationalists to challenge any boycott and to finance potential allies. Plan

Colombia is also a strategy to contain and undermine the appeal and of the Colombian revolutionary advance in other Latin American countries.

The existence of the FARC, CONAIE and the Chaves regime in adjacent territories is mutually supportive. While Venezuela's nationalist-populist project has its roots in the popular revulsion of corruption and decay of its political institutions and the destitution of the majority of its people, the fact of a powerful social-revolutionary movement at its doorstep strengthens Venezuela's borders from any U.S. inspired de-stabilization policy. Likewise the Chaves regime's refusal to allow U.S. reconnaissance planes over flights in Venezuelan airspace to search and target guerrilla forces, lessens the military pressure on the guerrillas.

The fact that in Ecuador a large-scale, peasant-indian movement opposes U.S. militarization of the Ecuadorean-Colombian border weakens the imperial war effort. The Ecuadorean regimes embrace of dollarization of the economy and the construction of a U.S. military base has de-legitimized the regime in the midst of growing impoverishment, heightening socio-political tensions.

The radical triangle and the conflict with the U.S. empire can spill over in neighboring countries. Peru, a staunch U.S. client formerly run by CIA and secret police chief Vladimir Montesinos is in a period of instability, as popular mass movements compete with neo-liberal politicians for power and influence. In Brazil the reformist left Workers Party won a series of important municipal elections including the mayoralty in Sao Paolo, while President Cardoso's party continues its downward spiral. More important the Landless Workers Movement (MST) continues to organize and occupy large landed estates and resist state repression in a tense and conflictual countryside. Further south, major peasant and urban mobilizations have, with increasing frequency, paralyzed the economies of Bolivia and Paraguay, while in Argentina, the provinces are in continual rebellion, cutting highways and attacking municipal political institutions. It is in this context of growing continental mobilization that Plan Colombia has to be seen as an attempt to behead the most advanced radicalized and well-organized opposition to U.S. hemispheric hegemony.

To date, the upsurge of the multi-faceted opposition in the radical triangle has checkmated or reversed U.S. policies at the edge of imperial concerns. Washington's historical policy of isolating the Cuban Revolution from Latin America and the Caribbean has been effectively shattered. Chaves' visit and the oil agreement consolidates Cuba's energy sources.

The Ibero-American Conference in Panama in November 2000 calling for an end of the Helms-Burton Act totally isolated U.S. diplomats. Washington's carefully calibrated steps to weaken the Chaves's regime have been repulsed. OPEC elected a Venezuelan, Ali Rodriguez, to head the organization. The Caribbean countries eagerly sought out and signed beneficial oil agreements with Venezuela. The conflict in the Mid-East has strengthened Chaves' hand in dealing with the U.S.: witness his public attack on Plan Colombia and the favorable diplomatic responses from Brazil, Mexico and other key countries.

The strategy of Washington follows a "domino approach": Plan Colombia means to first defeat the guerrillas, then surround and pressure Venezuela and Ecuador before moving toward escalating internal de-stabilization. The strategic goal is to reconsolidate power in northern South America, secure unrestricted access to oil and enforce the "no alternatives to globalization" ideology for the rest of Latin America.

Maintaining the Mystique

Plan Colombia is about maintaining the mystique of the invincibility of empire and the irreversibility of neo-liberal policies. The power elite in Washington knows that the beliefs held by oppressed peoples and their leaders are as effective in retaining U.S. power as the actual exercise of force. As long as Latin American regimes and their opposition continue to believe that there is no alternative to U.S. hegemony they will conform to the major demands emanating from Washington and its representatives in the international financial institutions. The belief that U.S. power is untouchable that its dictates are beyond the reach of the nation-state (which the rhetoric of globalization reinforces) has been a prime factor in reinforcing U.S. material rule (i.e.

economic exploitation, military bases construction, etc.). Once U.S. dominance is tested and successfully resisted by popular struggle in one region, the mystique is eroded and people and even regimes elsewhere begin to question the U.S. defined parameters of political action. Once the mystique is challenged and the questioning spreads across the continent, a new impetus is given to opposition forces in challenging the neo-liberal rules and regulations facilitating the pillage of their economies. Once the rules are questioned, capital, ever fearful of a revival of nationalist and socialist reforms and re-distributive structural adjustments will flow out. The reversion to more restricted markets and the constraints of risk and declining profit margins will weaken the dollar. The flight from the dollar will make it difficult for the U.S. economy to finance its huge current account imbalances.

The fear of this chain reaction is at the root of Washington's hostility to any challenge anywhere that could set in motion, large scale and extended political opposition.

Colombia is a case in point. In itself the economic and political stake of the U.S. within Colombia is not overly substantial. Yet the possibility of a successful emancipator struggle led by the FARC, ELN and their popular allies could undermine the mystique, and set in motion movements in other countries and perhaps put some backbone in some Latin leaders. Plan Colombia is about preventing Colombia from becoming an example which demonstrates that alternatives are possible and that Washington invincible.

More significantly a Cuba-Venezuela-Colombia alliance would provide a powerful political and economic bloc: Cuban social and security know-how, Venezuela's energy clout and Colombian oil, labor power, agriculture and industry. The complimentary political-economies could become an alternative pole to the U.S. centered empire. Plan Colombia is organized to destroy the potential centerpiece of that political alliance: the Colombian insurgency.

Vacuous Phrases and Concrete Realities

Plan Colombia has the virtue of being a straightforwardly military operation directed by the U.S. to destroy its class adversary in order to consolidate its empire in Latin America. The anti-drug rhetoric is more for domestic consumption than any operational guide to action. The guerrilla leaders and their movements understand this and act accordingly, mobilizing their social basis of support, securing their military supplies and fashioning an appropriate anti-imperial strategy. Faced with this stark political-military polarity, clearly defined by each adversary, many academic and putatively progressive intellectuals retreat to apolitical abstractions divorced from the real power configurations and class struggle into obscurantist and reified concepts. They speak of the World Capitalist System, Accumulation on a World Scale, Historic Defeats, The Age of Extremes - vacuous phrases written large and repeated as a mantra which explains nothing and obscures the specific class and political basis of the growing anti-imperialist movements and class struggle.

Given the strategic importance of the Colombian outcome in the eyes of Washington and the potential that struggles has as the cutting edge for the breakup of U.S. hegemony in Latin America it is important to note that accumulation of U.S. capital depends on the results of a political struggle within a nation-state. Moreover, recognizing the centrality of oil as the primary source of energy for the United States, a politico-military victory for the United States in Colombia would isolate Chaves and facilitate efforts to undermine his regime. While the FARC/ELN exist as the radical "greater evil" (in the eyes of Washington), U.S. policy planners have to move cautiously against Chaves' foreign policy for fear he will radicalize domestic policy in line with the Colombian left. For all his nationalist foreign policy pronouncements, Chaves has followed a fairly orthodox fiscal policy, respected and even invited new foreign investors and has scrupulously met Venezuela's external (and internal) debt payments. Thus Washington has followed complex policies toward its adversaries in the triangle, maintaining cool but correct relations with the Chaves regime, while sharply escalating its support of the war against the FARC/ELN.

Washington's Multi-Track Policy

Washington is pursuing a multi-track policy in relation to the different kinds of opposition that it faces in the region. In relation to Colombia where a U.S. client controls the state apparatus and the guerrilla formations represent a systemic challenge, the State Department has declared all-out war, the centralization and expansion of the war machine and the marginalization of autonomous popular organizations in civil society. While the demilitarized zone where peace negotiations take place is tolerated, Washington is intent on tightening the military encirclement of the region, militarily taking control along the border (particularly the Ecuadorean-Colombian) frontier) and preparing for an eventual all-out military assault on guerrilla leadership within the demilitarized zone.

U.S. military strategy has increasingly focused on the expansion and operational efficacy of the paramilitary forces. For over a decade the CIA aided in the formation of paramilitary groups ostensibly to combat the drug cartel. Over the past three years, Washington has escalated clandestine support to the paramilitary forces via its military aid to the Colombian Armed Forces and tolerated their drug activities. The paramilitary terrorists play an essential role in Plan Colombia: aggressively "social cleansing" entire regions of peasant activists, suspected of guerrilla sympathies. The estimated 10,000 paramilitary force is Washington's "card" for scuttling the peace negotiations and turning the Colombian conflict into a total war. Washington's tactic is to push for the presence of the paramilitary forces in the peace negotiations and then allow Pastrana to mediate as a centrist between the two extremes, imposing a settlement which sustains the socio-economic status quo. Most likely this will cause a breakdown in the negotiations and total war.

Washington combines a two-track policy with the paramilitary forces: "paper criticism" in annual State Department reports, and large-scale material support via U.S. military aid to the Colombian military.

While the U.S. follows an almost exclusively military track with Colombia, (accompanied by minor financial incentives to co-opt NGOs to work on alternative crops), in Venezuela Washington seeks to avoid precipitating a major confrontation prematurely. The State Department realizes that the

balances of forces within Venezuela are unfavorable to any direct military political action. Chaves has reformed the judiciary, won Congressional elections, appointed constitutional-minded senior officers and has secured solid majority support among the populace. Washington's allies among the business elite, the traditional parties and in the state apparatus are not in a position at this time, to provide effective channels for a Washington funded and directed de-stabilization effort.

The strategy for now is to wage a propaganda war based on creating favorable conditions for future full-scale de-stabilization and a civilian-military coup. U.S. tactics are the reverse of its policies toward the Colombian regime. Against Chaves, Washington speaks against the authoritarian dangers of Chaves centralization of power; the State Department promotes greater autonomy for its clients elites in civil society. In Venezuela, Washington seeks to fragment power and provide a platform on which to reorganize the discredited traditional parties. While in Colombia the U.S. supports the IMF-Pastrana austerity programs, in Venezuela, Washington focuses on mass poverty and unemployment, hoping to stimulate popular disaffection.

In Ecuador like in Colombia, Washington strongly backs the centralist leadership of the executive power, the repression of the social movements and the marginalization of the opposition representation in Congress. The dollarization of the economy and the concession of a U.S. military base are the clearest indications of Ecuador's conversion to U.S. client-status.

The U.S. multi-track policy of military confrontation (Plan Colombia) via the state apparatus and paramilitary forces in Colombia, diplomatic and political pressure via elites in civil society in Venezuela, political-economic co-optation of the Ecuadorean executive define the complex pattern of intervention. It is far too early to make a definitive judgment about the U.S. multi-track policy. In its early stages, Plan Colombia has led to a more aggressive use of paramilitary forces, greater civilian casualties but no effective "roll-back" of the guerrillas. On the negative side, the further deterioration of the economy has increased urban disaffection and weakened Pastrana's political position as evidenced by the

sharp losses in the municipal elections late in 2000. In Venezuela, the Chaves regime is consolidating institutional power, building support in the trade unions via new free elections while retaining mass support. In Ecuador the social movements and the indian-peasant coalition retains the power to mobilize support, even as Washington's allies have at least temporarily succeeded in pushing through military agreements and the overt subordination of the Ecuadorean economy to the U.S. Treasury (via dollarization).

Consequences of U.S. Military Escalation

Plan Colombia - a typical low intensity war (where large-scale U.S. financing and arms and low level ground troop commitment are combined) has already had a high intensity impact (on peasants and workers) which is internationalizing the conflict. Despite predictable denials, U.S. military and intelligence agencies have been active in promoting Colombian paramilitary forces to decimate civilian-largely peasant-supporters of the FARC/ELN in the villages. Dozens of suspected peasants, community activists, school teachers, and others are assassinated, in order to terrorize the rest of the population. Frequent paramilitary sweeps in regions occupied by the U.S. advised Colombian military has led to the displacement of over a million peasants. Paramilitary terror is part of the repertoire of U.S. counter-insurgency tactics designed to empty the countryside and deny the guerrillas logistical support, food and new recruits.

As Plan Colombia escalates the violence, thousands of peasants are fleeing toward and crossing the border into Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama and Brazil.

Inevitably cross border attacks by the paras of refugees has widened the military conflict. Family and relatives of guerrilla activists put to flight, retain their ties and contacts. The frontier and borders have become war zones in which squatter refugees living in squalor are partisans in the conflict and are targets of the Colombian military. Rather than containing the civil conflict, Plan Colombia is extending and internationalizing the war; exacerbating instability in the adjoining regions of neighboring countries.

Plan Colombia clearly escalates the degree and visibility of U.S. involvement in Colombia. With an estimated three hundred U.S. military advisors and additional sub-contracted mercenaries flying helicopters, U.S. involvement has moved down the chain from planning, design and direction of the war to the operational-tactical level. Moreover, U.S. policymakers have used their financial levers to reward pliant and cooperative Colombian military officials and to punish or humiliate those who do not sufficiently respond to U.S. commands or advice. The perception (and reality) among Colombians is that Plan Colombia is transforming a civil war into a national war. There is absolutely no doubt that the Colombian elite and sectors of the upper middle class are in favor of even greater and more direct U.S. military intervention. Among the peasants however, the greater U.S. presence means greater use of chemical defoliants, increasingly aggressive and destructive military forays to eradicate coca and other food plants, and to physically eliminate persons that stand in the way. Plan Colombia is transforming a civil war into a national liberation struggle.

This nationalist dimension could provide added urban support to the guerrilla struggle from students, professionals, and trade unionists while pushing apolitical farmers into the guerrilla camp, on the grounds of household survival.

Plan Colombia's prime emphasis on a military approach to popular insurgency is militarizing Colombian society-increasing the overseas outflow of professionals and others fleeing the growing intimidation of the unleashed paramilitary/military forces in the cities. Putting Colombia on a war footing intimidates the average Colombian, but it also alienates lower-middle class Colombians, subject to arbitrary searches and interrogation. The loss of the limited urban space where Colombians carry on civil discourse will increase underground activity for some while forcing further withdrawal from public life for others. Trade union and civic demands are deemed "subversive to the war effort" by the government, civil oppositions are "fifth columnists acting on behalf of the guerrillas". The result is an increase in the already record high number of trade unionists and journalists assassinated. Intimidation of some will be accompanied by the radical rejection of the state by others.

Plan Columbia draws several billions (3.5 billion) from Colombian treasury at a time when the government is imposing austerity measures and cuts in social expenditures which adversely affect wage and salaried groups. By increasing Colombia's military spending, Plan Colombia's increases, the public's opposition to the state, which in turn increases the demand by the military apparatus/U.S. policymakers to increase the repressive apparatus?

Neoliberal policies and the militarization of the conflict requires a bigger centralized state and a shrinking and constricted civil society – at least among the popular classes of civil society.

The reinforcement of the State and its commitment to fight a two front war a war in the countryside with arms and in the cities with neo-liberal austerity policies not only deepens the polarization between the regime and the civilian populace, but it increasingly isolates the regime and makes it more dependent on Washington and the burgeoning military and paramilitary organizations in the cities as well as in the countryside.

Plan Columbia has many unintended consequences which far from containing the conflict and building up support for the regime, extend and deepen the conflict and isolate the regime. Essentially this is because Washington and its Colombian clients, blinded by the single-minded pursuit of imperial power have a false reading of the revolutionary challenge.

Washington's Diagnosis: Foibles and Facts Essentially Washington's Plan Colombia operates from three mistaken assumptions

- 1) A false analogy extrapolated from its victories in Central America.
 - 2) A series of false equations about the nature of the Colombian guerrillas and their source of strength.
 - 3) A misplaced emphasis or exaggerated focus on the drug basis of guerrilla political power. The FARC/ELN challenge to power cannot be compared to the Central American guerrilla struggles in the 1980s.
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First of all, there is the time factor the Colombian guerrillas have a longer trajectory, accumulating a vast storehouse of practical experiences, particularly about the pitfalls of peace accords that fail to transform the state and structural reform in the center of a settlement. Secondly, the guerrilla leadership of the FARC is made up mostly of peasant leaders or individuals who have developed deep ties to the countryside, unlike the Central American commanders who were mostly middle class professionals eager to return to city life and an electoral political career. Thirdly, the geography is different. Not only is Colombia far larger, the topography favors guerrilla warfare. Moreover the guerrilla political-terrain relationship in Colombia is more favorable.

The guerrillas by social origin and experience are much more familiar with the terrain of warfare. Fourthly, the FARC leadership has put socio-economic reforms in the center of their political negotiations-unlike the Central Americans who prioritized the reinsertion of the ex-commanders into the electoral process. Fifthly, the Colombian guerrillas are totally self-financing and are not subject to the pressures and deals of outside supporters as was the case in Central America. Sixthly, the FARC has passed through a peace accord between 1984-90 in which thousands of its supporters and sympathizers were assassinated and no progress was made in reforming the socio-economic system. Finally the guerrillas have observed the results of the Central American accords and are not impressed by the results; the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, the impunity of the military's human rights' violators or the enrichment of many of the ex-guerrilla commanders, some of whom have joined the chorus supporting U.S. intervention in Colombia.

Given these differences Washington's two track policy of talking peace and financing alternative crops while escalating the war and promoting crop eradication, is doomed to failure. The carrot of a peace settlement for the commanders and the war of attrition at the base will not drive the FARC to settle for a peace accord in which electoral insertion, military institutional continuity and rampaging neo-liberalism remain in place. The second fallacious assumption of U.S. policymakers is the simplistic analysis they make of the sources of FARC power. Washington strategic thinkers equate the FARC with the drug trade, deriving its strength from the millions of dollars they accrue to

recruit fighters and to the "terror tactics" they practice to intimidate the populace and gain control of swathes of the countryside.

The simple equations: FARC=drugs, drugs=\$\$, \$\$=recruits, recruits=terror, terror=growth of territorial control.

This superficial approach lacks any historical, social and regional dimension, thus completely missing out the social dynamics of FARC's growing influence. First it overlooks the historical process of FARC formation and growth in particular regions and classes. The FARC has become a formidable guerrilla formation through the accumulation of forces over time, not in a linear fashion but, with setbacks and advances. Family ties, living and working experiences in regions abandoned or harassed by the state have played a big role in recruitment and movement building over a 35 year period. Via trial and error, reflection and study, the FARC has been able to accumulate a vast store of practical understanding of the psychology and material bases of guerrilla warfare and mass recruitment.

Throughout its history of championing land reform and peasant rights the FARC has with considerable success been able to create peasant cadres who link villagers and leaders and communicate in both directions. These historical links and experiences, far more than the drug trade tax is instrumental in the growth of the FARC. In fact, the role of the FARC sales tax is shaped by its historical-political evolution and not vice versa. The decision to tax drug-traffickers and reinvest the funds back into the movement - isolated examples of personal enrichment to the contrary notwithstanding - reveals the political character of the movement.

In areas of FARC control, drugs are not sold or consumed. The FARC protects the peasant producers, while the U.S. political and military allies and banks, commercialize drugs and launder the profits.

Socially, the FARC is inserted in the class structure via inter-locking with villagers and defending peasant interests. The FARC recruits from the peasants and the urban poor with whom it works, and with which in many cases it has family ties. To the extent that military/paramilitary depredations uproot villagers, it makes young peasants available and willing recruits for the guerrilla armies.

The same goes with coca crop eradication programs: destruction of peasant livelihood creates propitious conditions for listening to the guerrilla's call to arms.

The guerrilla strength in the provinces is derived not only from the exploitative and abusive rule of the economic elites but because of the concentration of State spending and consumption in Bogota and to a lesser extent the other major cities. The historical urban-rural polarization has contributed to the formation of rural armies, by regional politicians as well as the guerrillas.

But the arbitrary and violent intervention in the countryside by the military at the service of the Bogota political elite and the resident landlords increases the distance between the political class and the peasants, many who feel closer to the guerrillas. Finally U.S. policymakers over-emphasize the centrality of drug income in the guerrilla war. No one would deny that the drug tax is an important factor, a necessary source of revenue for financing arms and food purchases. But it is hardly sufficient.

What the ideologists of Plan Colombia ignore or underestimate is the importance of FARC's struggles on behalf of basic peasant interests (land, credit, roads, etc.), their political education and ideological appeals, the social services and law and order that they provide. In most of their dealings with the rural population, the FARC represents order, rectitude and social justice. While drug taxes buy arms, it is this ensemble of social, political and ideological Activities that resonate with the peasantry and that attract the peasants to the call to arms. Class loyalties and village allegiances are not bought by drug taxes or arms. Otherwise the military and paramilitary forces would be an unbeatable force! The strength of the FARC is based on the interplay of ideological appeals and the resonance of its analysis and political practices with the everyday reality of peasant life.

To undermine the FARC, Washington would have to change the socio-economic reality, which Plan Colombia is designed to defend. Results and Perspectives of a "Mis-diagnoses" Washington's Plan Colombia is a typical example of an imperial power pouring arms and money to prop up a loyal client (the Pastrana regime) who increasingly relies on coercion (the military and paramilitary forces) and political-economic allies who appropriate land,

dispossess peasant families' land. The military recruits conscripts with no stake in the military outcome and trains military professionals with no rapport with the people (but loyalty to the hierarchy) and are unfamiliar with the terrain of struggle. The military officials are trained in high technology weaponry and are mainly concerned with professional promotion. In general the U.S. directed militarization program has not raised the low morale among the conscripts or even the lower ranks of the officers. The military tactics target civilian groups from which many of the conscripts are recruited. The large-scale destruction of crops and villages has little attraction for normal recruits which is why the military relies on the hired assassins in the paramilitary groups to carry out the "dirty war".

Plan Colombia provokes fear and flight among the peasants and perhaps the paramilitary formations recruits a few among the uprooted young. However, it is doubtful for reasons of history, biography and social-economic background that the paramilitary forces can match the FARC/ELN in securing new recruits.

The continuing and deepening war and the increasing isolation of the regime are leading to greater U.S. military engagement. Already U.S. military advisors are teaching and directing high tech warfare, and providing operational leadership in close proximity to the battlefield.

Washington is pushing for and extending operational bases to new regions and these garrison bases will become targets of the guerrilla forces. If the Colombian forces are not up to the task of defending the forward bases from which U.S. advisors operate, will that be used as a pretext to send more U.S. troops to protect the bases? This would be the beginning link in a chain leading to greater U.S. ground trip engagement.

While serious questions may be raised about the degree and depth of future U.S. military involvement, there is no question that Plan Colombia means deepening the war and that will surely lead to further undermining the Colombian economy. The treasury will be drained to finance the war, the increased air and land war will provoke a massive increase in refugees and

destabilize regional (and ultimately national) economies. Refugee camps have frequently become hotbeds for radical politics the politics of the uprooted. Drug, contraband and other criminal activity will flourish, straining the capacity of border policing by neighboring countries. History teaches us that the U.S. will not be able to localize the effects of its war. What goes down has a way of coming around.

Conclusion: The Blowback Support

Blowback refers to the unanticipated adverse effects of U.S. involvement in overseas wars. For example, the U.S. training of Cuban exiles and Afghan Islamic fanatics to fight Communism led to highly organized drug gangs who supplied U.S. and European markets and later engaged in terrorist activities, in some cases attacking U.S. targets.

The big narco-traffickers in Colombia are not the people described by Washington's anti-drug boss and propagated by Plan Colombia's ideological defenders. The so-called narco-guerrillas and peasant coca growers receive less than 10% of the earnings because they only produce and tax the raw materials. The big profits are in the processing and commercialization in the export market and in the laundering of drug profits.

The real configurations of power in the narcotics traffic at each point of transit to the consumer are strategic U.S. allies in the counter-revolutionary war.

If we look at the drug routes across the Caribbean and Central America, they pass through important client regimes obviously with official backing. The same is true in South Asia and the Middle East. Drug production, processing and transport follow a route via past or present U.S. clients: Afghanistan, Burma, ex-Soviet Republics->Turkey->Bosnia, Albania->Europe/US.

Turkey is the centerpiece of the whole European drug trade with the active protection of the Turkish military and intelligence agencies. They have deep ties with Bosnian and especially Albanian gangsters who's activities are facilitated by the U.S. strong military and political backing of Albania/Kosova and Bosnia.

With official backing these gangsters have combined drugs, white slavery and gunrunning.

In some cases, Washington's strategic allies and anti-Communist clients have turned against it, in many cases following arms training and supply by the CIA. For example, former CIA clients have organized terrorist cells that have even bombed targets like New York's World Trade Center.

Colombia presents a similar blowback potentiality. The traffickers who buy the coca leaves, process the paste and turn out the final product (powder) are in almost all cases either working with or members of paramilitary groups, high military officials, landowners and not a few bankers and other respectable capitalists, who launder drug money as investments in real estate, construction, etc. Profits from overseas operations are laundered in leading U.S. and European banks as any number of past and present investigations have revealed. Key U.S. political allies in Colombia and influential economic elites in U.S. banking are the major players in the narcotics trade undermining the fundamental ideological prop of Washington's Plan Colombia and revealing its true, imperial underpinning. Drug traffickers backed by the U.S. today are thus active in promoting the drug abuse and crime that continues to plague U.S. cities especially among minority youth. Secondly, the violence associated with the drug trade creates extortionists known to shake down U.S. and European overseas business. Thirdly, in engaging in violent confrontations the narco-paramilitary officials destabilize the investment climate perpetuating insecurity and inhibiting long-term investments. As the breach between the U.S. anti-drug ideology and its links to the narco-military/paramilitary becomes clearer, this will likely provoke domestic dissent. For now there is no prospect of a large-scale opposition movement in the U.S. but, in Colombia, in Venezuela, Ecuador and the rest of Latin America, feeling the brunt of the war to save the Empire, the advance of the revolutionary struggle in Colombia has great consequences for their future. Copyright 2001 James Petra.
