

THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLOMBIAN DEFENCE POLICY IN THE LATE 1990S AND THE EARLY 2000S:

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The advancement and modernization of Colombian military apparatus since the late 1990s has been determinant for the current progress of its internal conflict, which nowadays presents a marked reduction of violence due to a political settlement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), after more than 50 years of hostilities. Defence policy in all this scenario has become crucial for strengthening the Government of Colombia (GOC) in the face of the challenges presented by guerrillas and organized crime, taking it to regain control of territories, enhance its institutional presence, and state's legitimacy and security. But, how has it been possible all this contemporary process of vibrant military evolution of the Colombian Public Force in the late 1990s and the early 2000s? It seems that a mixture of local and foreign variables made achievable both political will and financial resources, to carry out an ambitious transformation of defence apparatus that ended up by curving the internal conflict in GOC's favor. Such scenario propelled a major plan of military aid sponsored by the United States (US), termed as Plan Colombia, in charge of coping with drug trafficking first and with terrorist-insurgent related activities lately. Thus, the aim of this article is analyzing comprehensively the development of the US-GOC military cooperation in the period 1998-2012, as well as the political underpinnings that triggered the inclusion of both counter-narcotic and counterinsurgent goals. This is going to be done by studying two variables: the GOC's strategy of linking FARC's actions with drug trafficking, international terrorism and human rights abuses to change US perceptions in regard to the use of military cooperation (1998-2002); and the consequences of the Colombian military strengthening in line with US-GOC military cooperation (2002-2012).

The first part, "the FARC and the demilitarized zone (1998-2002): changing US perceptions", helps to comprehend how the political stature of the insurgents was severely damaged given their instrumentalisation of the demilitarized zone (DZ) as operational base for launching illegal actions. The lack of compromise

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and the fact of negotiating without a cease fire, was used by the GOC to promote a political strategy that eroded all support to guerrillas in the international realm, taking them to be considered a terrorist organization in the US and Europe. Ultimately, this helped to push forward the limited use of Plan Colombia material and financial resources from merely anti- drug objectives to antiterrorist as well.

The second part, “defeating the FARC: US-GOC military cooperation (2002-2012)”, studies the strengthening of Colombian military forces in line with Plan Colombia and further intelligence cooperation. They were vital elements for weakening the insurgents in the field, taking them to negotiate with the GOC after several defeats to both political and military structures. In this sense, it was crucial the role of technology and air power to cope with the guerrilla warfare movements strategy already present in most of the country. Such advancement was done amid major political changes in the international arena, epitomized in the war on terrorism launched by the US in 2001.

Finally, a series of conclusions emanated from this entire scenario of local and international variables that nurtured a successful US-GOC military cooperation are described. Among the most important results can be highlighted how changes in Colombian military institutions supported a successful political strategy, which in sum press the FARC to start peace negotiations with the GOC. All this was possible thanks to technological and doctrinaire advances present in important fields such as intelligence and interoperability, and bolstered a more offensive strategy from the military forces in all the Colombian territory.

In order to understand this situation is necessary to revise the period before 1998, when drug cartels and both leftist and rightist armed illegal movements made of Colombia a state with deep humanitarian and political issues. Those factors tend to isolate the country from the international political arena and, specifically, from the US. The transition from the administration of Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) to Andres Pastrana (1998-2002) was marked by a realignment of US-GOC relationship and the upsurge of optimism due to the development of a peace negotiation process with the FARC, which served also as electoral platform of Pastrana’s campaign. In this context, Colombia’s security issues were already articulated with wider scenarios rooted in the advancement of illegal industries with hemispheric connotations. For Mason (2004), some of the local threats that face Colombia are also linked to regional, hemispheric and global security dynamics, which are dominated by two major discourses in international politics: the war on drugs and, human rights. From such rationale the peace process international perception in the late 1990s was built, being represented in the main political world actors: the European Union (EU) and the US.

By 1996, the link between leftist and rightist illegal groups with drug trafficking in the Andean region was a highly sensible topic of hemispheric

security. In this sense, with the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Communism as political system, leftist groups in South America like the “Shining Path” and the FARC became a hybrid of insurgency politically-motivated and criminal enterprise (Steinitz, 2001). Under this scope was designed the US foreign policy towards Colombia, being a central part of such effort the War on Drugs. Equally important was human rights, whose records were linked to military aid approval in the US Congress (Serafino, 2001).

The fall of both Cali and Medellin cartels left in smaller illegal groups and independent drug traffickers’ hands the control of drug economy, one of them the FARC. The displacement of coca crops to FARC controlled territories in Colombia from Peru and Bolivia, given the aggressive campaign of eradication and interception of illegal flights, as well as the central role assured to the rebels by the new drug lords in its operations (Otis, 2014), made of this organization a central piece of the profitable illicit business.

In the human rights field the situation was not different, being registered by organizations like Human Rights Watch (HRW) several infringements to Colombian society; they were done by legal and illegal actors amid the context of political violence. This was epitomized by the complex security situation in 1997; according to HRW (1997), political assassinations, kidnappings, the use of landmines, and attacks to civil objectives, including public buses were part of the repertory of guerrillas and illegal self-defence forces. The perception of a worsening situation in regard to human rights was exacerbated due to the murder of two European citizens by the FARC in the jungles of Choco: Johan Kehler and Alexander Scheurer. Additionally, by June 1998 the FARC announced its intention to consider any journalist whose discourse was seemingly an apology of militarism, legitimate objective of its actions (Human Rights Watch, 1998). Certainly, such scenario put under scrutiny both FARC and GOC movements in the face of international community.

Literature in the studied area has been wide in terms of the internal conflict, as well as the US leverage when dealing with both the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism. The latter topic has been highly influential in the US-GOC bilateral agenda, shaping defence policy and military aid in Colombia. According to Tickner (2001), such relation has been ruled by the US national interest that sees drug trafficking as a threat against American system of values, just like Cold War communism. Such approach is similar to the one exposed by Rosen (2015), when he describes the emergence of the War on Drugs in the late 1960s and the early 1970s amid the bipolar confrontation. During this period President Richard Nixon declared that “illicit drugs were America’s ‘public enemy number one’”, and later Ronald Reagan referred to it as a “threat to US national security”. For Mejía (2016), the great increase in cocaine production as well as the notorious

deterioration of security conditions pushed for a major involvement of the US in the Colombian defence policy; factor that according to Holmes (2011), it was propelled by the dominance of political violence and drug lords' vicious offensive against the state in the early 1990s. Finally, in line with the War on Terror launched after the attacks of September 2001 in the US, Vaicius & Isacson (2003) argue that the War on Drugs and Terror overlapped, making possible to wider the military aid previously limited to antidrug activities.

On the other hand, human rights influence in the US military assistance towards Colombia as related topic of study has made possible several pieces of research from different sources, whose results shows ambivalent consequences with regard to the Colombian human rights record once regulations have been put in place. For Callaway & Matthews (2008, p. 15), aid allocation in the post-Cold War environment has been tied to states' human rights profile; topic which certainly was remarkably important during the debates about the Plan Colombia and the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. This is supported by the arguments of Serafino, Beittel, Ploch, & Rosen (2014) about the congressional process that ended up with the approbation of the Leahy amendment in 1998; instrument to forbid the usage of Department of Defence funds "to train units of foreign military and other security forces if there was credible information that a member of a unit had committed a gross violation of human rights" (Serafino, Beittel, Ploch, & Rosen, 2014). In comparison, Tickner (2001) argues that even though certain focus on human rights was emphasized as part of the military aid allocated to Colombia in the late 1990s and 2000s, the internal dynamic of the conflict maintained in high numbers the violations committed against Colombian society by armed actors; notwithstanding, efforts undertaken by the GOC to reverse such situation.

This article makes use of qualitative research methods and theoretical tools rooted in qualitative comparative analysis, theories of International Relations, and foreign policy analysis. Equally important, it is the analysis over official documents such as diplomatic cables from the US and the GOC, which help to construct a descriptive argument that follows a logic sequence of events that serves to understand the developments of US-GOC military cooperation inner congressional and executive circles. All this was developed through the work with primary and secondary sources found in news articles, journals and academic studies specialized in US-GOC relationship, as well as the making of US foreign policy towards Latin-America. It was invariably important the input of declassified archives from the US government in regard to its relations with Colombia in the 1990s and 2000s; all of them form an important element to comprehend the debate about the enhancement of Colombia's defence apparatus as consequence of a successful US-GOC military cooperation.

THE FARC AND THE DEMILITARIZED ZONE: CHANGING US PERCEPTIONS (1998-2002)

Doubtless, the negotiating platform of President Andres Pastrana meant a risky political gamble aimed at finishing the longest conflict in the western hemisphere. Such effort was also directed at addressing both drug trafficking and the humanitarian crisis present in Colombia by that moment; the latter was rooted in violent acts perpetrated by illegal armed actors in great part of the national territory. Therefore, to make viable the peace process characterized by the demilitarization of 42.000 km² in the departments of Meta and Caquetá was considered by the GOC to articulate a whole system of international pressure over the FARC. This answered to a calculation of the GOC who considered that negotiating with the rebels would be a long process which deserved a powerful backing from reputed and credible actors (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 1998). Such movement was equally aimed at attracting international attention to the country, a political strategy that ended up showing FARC's links with global terrorism, and drug and arms trafficking organizations. This assumption summed up to the proved continuous misconduct of the rebels against communities' rights led to a political debacle of the FARC's international public profile; scenario well seized by the GOC in the diplomatic arena. All this was done through a well concerted strategy of bilateral meetings and intelligence information exchange with foreign representatives and security agencies; at the end, the movement served to convince the US Government to widen the military aid from counternarcotics to counterinsurgency objectives as well.

The perception of an insurgent organization linked with international terrorism, illegal drug commercialization, and human rights abuses was already an issue of US-GOC dialogue. For the US, FARC rebels after the end of the Cold War were in a quagmire due to the lack of foreign financial assistance from communist regimes; element that pushed them into illicit economies like drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 1998). The fact that all those threats represented trans-border issues and menaces to US citizens brought the attention of the Clinton's administration in regard to the peace talks in Colombia. Under this entire context, members of both the US and the GOC representatives of the FARC, along with the lawyer Alvaro Leyva acting as middleman sustained several secret meetings in San Jose (Costa Rica) between December 1998 and January 1999. In the early encounters were discussed drug trafficking and the disappearance of US citizens perpetrated by the communist guerrilla, being especially important for the US the cases of Terrence Freitas, Ingrid Washinawatok and Laheenae Gay, American missionaries kidnapped and murdered in February 1999 by the illegal organization (MURILLO, 1999).

For the US, such early meetings previous to the DZ were an opportunity to demand to the FARC a cease fire against US interests in Colombia, the end of its participation in the drug trade, as well as the renounce to kidnapping as a mean of waging the conflict (U.S. Department of State, 1998). All those requirements certainly were done in order to push the illegal organization towards a credible negotiation with the GOC. However, Raul Reyes, representative of the insurgents in Costa Rica consistently rejected such accusations, just admitting a limited role as tax collectors of a monetary charge imposed by the organization over operations of cocaine paste between peasants and drug cartels (U.S. Department of State, 1998). A similar stand was shown in regard to kidnapping; according to the guerrilla leader, the organization condemned such practice since 1984, which was established in “the Uribe documents and in numerous other declarations and statements” (U.S. Department of State, 1998, p. 6).

Peace talks made President Andres Pastrana reluctant to link publicly the FARC with narcotics trade, preferring to see the rebel negotiating structure as “a political body distinct from drug traffickers” (Miller, 2001). Notwithstanding, in February 2001 operation “Gato Negro” probed the nexus between the insurgents and the industry of illicit drugs, all this while peace negotiations in the DZ were well underway. This joint operation carried out by the Colombian security forces deployed just over 3.500 combatants among officers, sub-officers and professional soldiers during 70 days (Chavez, Morales, & Vargas, 2003, p. 108) in Barrancominas, Guainia. As part of the most relevant results, it is possible to mention the arrest of Alberto D’ Costa, better known as Fernandinho Beira Mar, major Brazilian drug lord in Latin-America in the 1990s. This revealed before both national and international public opinion the relationship between the FARC and mafias in Latin-America around a common criminal goal: the illegal trade of drugs and arms by using complex transnational networks.

In Colombia, antidrug policy was not just part of the agenda of the GOC-FARC negotiation. For the GOC, it was as well a major destabilizing force with several consequences: economic distortion; land concentration; corruption; violence multiplier; financial engine for illegal armed groups; and investment hindrance (Contraloría General de la República, 2006). This had been influencing already Colombian foreign policy and its bilateral agenda with the US, whose main topic in the defence bilateral agenda by the late 1990s was the war on drugs. “Plan Colombia” was created in such context by 2000, but it was limited to drug control in its early stages. In that sense, Pastrana’s administration efforts were also focused on linking counterinsurgency to the program’s objectives; assumption partially fulfilled by “Gato Negro” achievements.

The cooperation program was initially designed by the GOC aiming at generating employment, economic incentives for the Colombian economy,

and recovery of affected areas by the internal conflict (Contraloría General de la República, 2006). However, since the US was the main contributor to “Plan Colombia”, it acquired a major military connotation (Chernick, 2012). Air interdiction, training to army battalions and antidrug police groups, and the modernization of equipments and infrastructure of the National Police and Military Forces were the chief goals of the US-GOC military cooperation agreement (Contraloría General de la República, 2006).

The link of the FARC and drug trafficking was not the only topic highlighted by the GOC to the international community and the US during the diplomatic offensive to complement the Plan Colombia. Equally important was the discourse around the relationship of the insurgents with international terrorist organizations, which were documented and exposed to mass media and intelligence agencies in the US. For the GOC, the DZ became a meeting and training center for different kinds of criminal groups around the globe, as well as for arms traffickers. By 1999 an airplane Ilushin 76 dropped a shipload of AK-47 rifles in Barrancominas, Guainia, which were part of an international illegal operation of arms trade departing from Byelorussia (Castro, 2004). To such event was added the arrest in “El Dorado” airport in Bogota of three Irish citizens in the mid 2001 who belonged to the Irish Republican Army (IRA), who were instructing the FARC on urban terrorism and explosives in the DZ (The New York Times, 2003). Those events backed the GOC’s accusation towards the FARC and its terrorist networks around the globe.

The denounces were exposed also by Colombian intelligence agencies to their pares in the US; adding the nexus of the FARC with Hezbollah as well as the use of artisan chemical weapons by the rebels during an offensive in the town of San Adolfo in September 2001 (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2001). All those movements in the military diplomatic field were coupled by certain findings from US intelligence agencies in the same year that revealed how the FARC was active in training and organizing leftist antigovernment groups in Argentina; apparently, the Colombian insurgents were trying to revive the “Montoneros”, an old guerrilla movement active during the 1970s in that country (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2001a).

By September 2001 the terrorist attacks in the US meant a modification of the US defence paradigm. Since that moment the War on Drugs was displaced by the War on Terrorism, and “standard restrictions prohibiting the use of counter-drug assets for counterinsurgency purposes began to evaporate, replaced by the new term counter-narcoterrorism (CNT)” (Luhan & Kilroy, 2008). The impact of the terrorist attacks pushed forward the perception inner US bureaucratic circles that drug trafficking and terrorism were interrelated problems (U.S. Department of State, 2001). However, such idea was previously gaining currency inside the

Republican administration. Robert Zoellick, a top foreign policy advisor to Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign stated that “the narcotraffickers and guerrillas compose one dangerous network”, while Bush publicly admitted that “U.S. assistance ‘will help the Colombian government protect its people, fight the drug trade, [and] halt the momentum of the guerrillas’” (GALEN, 2001).

Five months after the terrorist attacks in the US the DZ and the peace negotiations between the GOC and the FARC were ended, amid denounces to the international community about the Human Rights abuses of the FARC against inhabitants of the zone. Some of the most notorious actions that contributed to exhaust the DZ political oxygen were the crimes against population, the terrorist attacks to Colombia’s security and economic infrastructure, the armed strike in Putumayo in 2000, and the hijack of the “Aires” flight to kidnap senator Jorge Eduardo Gechem Turbay in February 2002.

Since the early days of the DZ several denounces linked the FARC with disappearances; torture; illegal land occupation; forced child recruitment; extortions to peasants; environmental destruction; and illegal trade of both arms and drugs (U.S. Department of Defense, 2000). Equally grave were the attacks carried out by the FARC in neighboring areas to the DZ, as well as the threats and the persecution to local authorities (Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y DIH, 2003). Such actions showed the real compromise of the FARC with the peace process, which took the international community in June 2000 to unanimously accused the FARC of abusing of population’s human rights in the DZ; this was done during a visit to the DZ of representatives of the EU, Japan, the US, and the United Nations (UN) (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 2000).

However, the FARC secretariat did not hear the claims of the international community, and by the mid and late 2000s concentrated its offensive in the Putumayo, where the GOC’s Plan Colombia efforts against illegal crops were taken place. The organization imposed an armed strike in September 2000 to hinder counternarcotics’ initiatives, local polls, and the advance of rightist militias. In consequence the illegal action prompted the displacement of about 5.000 inhabitants due to the difficulties for supplying basic necessities, a pronounced economic lost for peasants and small commerce (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 2000a), and the pressure to take up arms against the state (VILLAMARIN, 2014, p. 241). The situation was ameliorated in part thanks to an air bridge between Bogota and Puerto Asis done by the Colombian Air Force, which helped to deliver food and medicines to the 350.000 affected inhabitants in the region (El Tiempo, 2000).

The final straw came in February 2002 when a guerrilla command hijacked an Aires Airline flight making it to land in a town nearby to Neiva, where one of the passengers, Senator Eduardo Gechem Turbay, was kidnapped (PALACIO & QUINTERO, 2002).

The continuous abuses and crimes committed by the FARC in the DZ and in neighbouring areas pushed the GOC to end the peace negotiation. Through a broadcasted speech, Andres Pastrana ordered to the Colombian Military Forces to retake the demilitarized zone, while showing to the public opinion how the FARC had built landing tracks, structures for vehicles, and supported the expansion of coca crops. According to intelligence reports cited by Pastrana, the rebels were active as well in launching terrorist attacks, kidnapping for ransom, and developing relations with international terrorist organizations (Pastrana, 2002); all this was done by using the DZ as safe heaven. For James Lemoyne, special representative of the UN for the peace talks in Colombia, these acts eroded the negotiation taking it to its end (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 2002).

The terrible precedents of the DZ prompted the European Union (EU) to add the FARC in “its list of terrorist organizations” in June 2002 (BBC News, 2008); in the US lists the insurgents were already recognized as such since 1997 (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

Once the DZ and the peace talks ceased, public opinion’s frustration propelled Alvaro Uribe’s presidential campaign and election for two consecutive periods, 2002-2006 and 2010-2014. For the US, the new president pushed to a higher level the role of security and military forces; moreover, showing a good technocratic sense and will for collecting national resources to finance the strengthening of Colombian military apparatus.

Increasing the number of troops; an aggressive antidrug strategy; establishing a wide intelligence network; and even more importantly, directing extra public sources to defense were all initiatives proposed by President Uribe, which pleased the US Government (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 2002a). In response, the Bush administration lobbied in Capitol Hill in favor of achieving congressional approbation for using Plan Colombia’s antidrug equipment in counter-insurgent tasks. This was accepted over the base of good results in the war on drugs; human rights protection; and the adoption of a self-help economic strategy that collected local resources for defense budget (U.S. Department of State, 2002). Yet Uribe’s government was just engineering in that moment a tax reform to give more resources to Military Forces, by the 30th October, 2002, the US Congress allowed the Bush proposition which meant an strategic change in the Colombian conflict balance (Ospina, 2008).

DEFEATING THE FARC: US-GOC MILITARY COOPERATION (2002-2012):

The resolute support of the White House towards Colombia was capitalized by the Colombian diplomatic apparatus, which promoted all the positive results of Plan Colombia in the US among the bipartisan Congress. High level bilateral

dialogue between the Colombian Ministry of International Relations with all public branches in the US and, specially, with the Executive and Legislative powers was a key aspect of a strategic communicative effort (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2006, p. 266). In this way, Bush administration deepened US-GOC military cooperation, important factor to propel other regional initiatives that benefited Colombia through diverse US state agencies: the Antidrug Regional Initiative for the Andean Area; the Foreign Military Financing Program; the US Agency for International Development (USAID); and the State Department Antidrug Office (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2006, p. 267).

The range of relations linked to Plan Colombia surpassed the military field, reaching the political one through a series of visits to Colombia of a US bipartisan commission whose aim was to support positive lobby before Capitol Hill. One of the most important visits was held in 2005, when Condoleezza Rice, State Secretary (2005-2009), General Bantz J. Craddock, US Southern Command Chief (2004-2006), and a bipartisan delegation of the US Congress came to Bogota to meet President Alvaro Uribe. The visit was a key aspect to strengthen arguments in favor of Colombia in the US Legislative when the continuity of Plan Colombia, advantages of a free trade agreement with the Andean countries, and resources for demobilized programs were discussed (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2006, p. 267). A positive political scenario in both Colombia and the US meant that Alvaro Uribe's Democratic Security policy did not find any important hindrance, even though its military connotation was regularly criticized by civil society.

The link between drug trafficking and terrorism was an issue that gain tendency in decision making circles in the US, providing a great room of maneuver for the application of US-GOC military cooperation. The articulation of Plan Colombia to the counterinsurgent effort, with a special dedication to the southern regions of Colombia where coca crops were widespread, was done through a basic principle: more military power and presence in the Colombian territory. This interpretation saw FARC's expansion and influence as a determinant variable in the upsurge of drug trafficking (TOKATLIAN, 2001).

In this perspective, transport capacities were strengthened with helicopters Black Hawk and Huey, benefiting the most to the Colombian Army (Tokatlian, 2001). Yet the influx of equipment product of Plan Colombia cooperation was accomplished, the scarcity of pilots and flight crews was another problem to be solved, and for that reason the accent was placed in training and recruitment of personnel to be dedicated to those functions (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 2000b, p. 2). Crucial to accomplish such objective was the combined school of Flight of the Colombian Air Force in Melgar, Tolima, that according to the Department of State, was a key aspect for the success of Plan Colombia (U.S. Embassy Bogota, Colombia, 2001).

However, the influence of US cooperation went beyond of equipment donation and training to Colombian military personnel in line with Plan Colombia. Intelligence cooperation and the enhancement of offensive capacities of the Colombian Air Force was a parallel effort of US cooperation, managed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) through a covert action program since the early 2000s (PRIEST, 2013). This important program complemented Colombian Military Forces positive transformation, which made of the Colombian Air Force a decisive power in the military defeat of the FARC.

This initiative between the CIA and the Colombian Military, which also counted with the important participation of the National Security Agency (NSA), was authorized by Bush administration and continued under Obama administration (Priest, 2013). The indirect approach of the US towards Colombian national security, and the Colombian military action in itself, “has helped the Colombian government to re-gain large swathes of territory from the rebels, to work with locals to assuage grievances and to drastically reduce the numbers of kidnappings, homicides, and the hectare area of coca plant cultivation” (Noonan, 2013). In strategic terms, the technological leap and the overall military buildup were greatly important in reducing FARC’s ranks and neutralizing top commanders (The Guardian, 2013)

The breaking point that brought the US-GOC intelligence and military cooperation parallel to the Plan Colombia was the kidnapping of three US citizens’ contractors (Thomas Howes, Keith Stansell, and Marc Gonsalves) in Guaviare in February 2003. In order to find them as well as the FARC leadership, the US sent a team of CIA to set up the U.S. Embassy Intelligence Fusion Cell in Bogota to link US intelligence information with the work of the Colombian intelligence community; model that was used later for developing regional analogues for collecting and analyzing tactical intelligence (PRIEST, 2013). All these operation was articulated to the usage of precision-guided bombs launched by A-37 Dragonfly airplanes, which gave to the Colombian Air Force the accuracy necessary to hit FARC leaders in the Colombian mountains and jungles (Priest, 2013).

Such measures were facilitated by two presidential findings that allowed first CIA operations against international terrorist organizations and, a second one signed by President Reagan in the mid-1980s that authorized action against international narcotics traffickers (Priest, 2013). Since the FARC was declared as terrorist organization by the US Department of State (U.S. Department of State, 2016), US intelligence actions such as giving spy equipment and participating in training or offensive operations were permitted (PRIEST, 2013).

All this gave to the GOC the advantage over illegal organizations and more importantly, over the FARC. In a period of four years (2007-2011) top FARC leaders were neutralized in joint operations, starting with Negro Acacio and

Martin Caballero in 2007 (El Espectador, 2011). One year later during operation Phoenix, Raul Reyes (2008), the second in command of the FARC, die in a bombing raid. The same fate was faced by Mono Jojoy (2010) in the department of Meta, and Alfonso Cano (2011), the supreme commander of the FARC, in the department of Cauca (BLURADIO, 2016).

Another important aspect of operations that ended up weakening the chain command of the FARC and eventually its negotiating room before the Colombian state was the release of kidnapped citizens, by either military rescue or negotiations. In October 2008 thanks to an extensive intelligence maneuver named operation Jaque, the Colombian Military Forces rescued former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancour, three US citizens, and eleven members of Colombian Public Forces (El Espectador, 2011). Equally relevant was operation Chameleon in 2010, which served to liberate the Colombian National Police General Luis Mendieta, Colonel Enrique Murillo, Colonel William Donato Gómez, and Sergeant Arbey Delgado Argote; all of them lasted 12 years abducted by the FARC in the Guaviare jungle (El Espectador, 2011).

Other persons that remained abducted by the FARC until 2012 either escaped, died in captivity, were assassinated or released by the guerrilla organization. In 2003 Guillermo Gaviria, former Governor of Antioquia; Gilberto Echeverry, former Minister of Defense; and eight members of Colombian Public Forces were assassinated by their captors during a frustrated rescue operation (El Tiempo, 2012). Four years later in 2007, eleven deputies from the department of Valle were equally executed (El Tiempo, 2012). And in 2011 four members of the Colombian Public Force were executed after more than a decade of kidnapping (Vanguardia, 2011). In contrast, several hostages were liberated by the FARC in the period 2001-2012 as part of negotiating processes with the GOC; until in 2012 the FARC Secretariat announces its renounce to the kidnapping practice for ransom and political ends (El Espectador, 2012).

Eventually, after the state's offensive the FARC ended up negotiating with the GOC its demobilization and reinsertion to legality as a political movement in a process that lasted four years (2012-2016). To achieve this result was necessary a series of transformations inner Colombian Military Forces, which took them to gain the upper hand in intelligence and offensive operations against criminal organizations and, especially, the FARC. Under this schema it was possible not just to weakening the bellicose structure of the guerrilla, but also its political, financial, and strategic ones. By depriving the FARC of some of their more radical ideologues, hostile leaders, and key commanders dedicated to drug and arms trafficking was feasible to compel the secretariat to the negotiating table. At the same time, a great portion of FARC's political capital to negotiate with the government was eroded due to the military rescue of key political hostages such as Ingrid Betancour, the three US contractors, and members of Colombian Public

Forces. The same can be said with regard to the assassination of hostages, but instead of affecting just its negotiating room of maneuver, caused a very negative image of the FARC in Colombian public opinion; issue that made unpopular the Habana peace negotiation and the later agreement of 2016 inner Colombia in a certain degree.

CONCLUSION

The different transformations experienced by the Colombian Military Forces since the mid-1990s helped to change the balance of the internal conflict, helping to bring about the military defeat of the FARC. This factor certainly propelled a political settlement in the Habana negotiation (2012-2016), preventing another frustration such as the DZ during President Pastrana Administration. All this was possible thanks to doctrinaire positive changes that bolstered more effective planning and execution of operations, supported by a more offensive and mobile concept; as well as by the enhancement of intelligence, technology, communications, professionalization of human capital, and better structures of command and control (Presidencia de la República, 2008, p. 111).

For President Andres Pastrana the restructuring process of Colombian Military Forces was directed at augmenting their efficiency and efficacy, through the strengthening of equipment; human capital; offensive actions; legal support and integration with the community (Pastrana, 1999). From this perspective was implemented the Plan Colombia with the help of US military cooperation, and later with a huge Colombian budgetary effort during President Alvaro Uribe government. All this enterprise was the base for enhancing Colombian Military Forces that adopted a more robust shape to face the threat posed by the FARC and its huge resources earned through drug trafficking. In this sense, it is important to highlight that apart from a military stand, the Plan Colombia served as the economic structure for the greatest transformation ever experienced for the Colombian Armed Forces (RODRÍGUEZ, 2014).

Such developments led to a more efficient application of state's force given a better and faster troops displacement to the different places of Colombia's geography. The military reform that took place in Colombia from the mid-1990s gave enhanced capacities to the state in order to face the threat posed by illegal armed groups; factor that halted the FARC strategic plan of massive expansion and isolation of urban centers, which was already in process through the instrumentalisation of the DZ as a tactic rearguard (Presidencia de la República, 2008).

It might be stated that the presidency of Andres Pastrana was a starting point in the contemporary changes of the Colombian Military Forces, whose positive results were strengthened by Alvaro Uribe's administration and the policy of

Democratic Security that expanded the presence of Colombian security and intelligence apparatus. In this context were established three new divisions (VI Division; VII Division; and VIII Division); six High Mountain Battalions; sixty Counter-guerrilla Battalions; eleven groups of urban antiterrorist Special Forces; nine regular battalions; fourteen combat service and support companies; and new National Police garrisons (Schultze-Kraft, 2012, p. 210). In terms of the Colombian Air Force, its operative capacity was widened due to the acquisition of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircrafts; among them, twenty five Brazilian A-29² and thirteen Israeli K-firs (SCHULTZE-KRAFT, 2012, p. 411).

On the other hand, meaningful advancements in the planning and performing of military operations were registered. In this scenario, it is important to mention the creation of joint commands in 2004 and the development of the Joint Special Operations Command³ in 2008. Particularly, the Joint Command objective was to increase the capacity of Colombian Military Forces to develop and implement joint operations in determined regions under a single chain of command, belonging either to the army, the Navy, or the Air Force (SCHULTZE-KRAFT, 2012, p. 410).

The development of joint intelligence was another great advancement which greatly supported the offensive stand of Colombian security apparatus. In order to do it, the Joint Special Operations Command was in charge of increasing tactic intelligence capacity of both Military Forces and the National Police, by centralizing the intelligence collected and analyzed produced by each institution (SCHULTZE-KRAFT, 2012, p. 411). This was accelerated thanks to the implementation of the Joint Intelligence Junta, as an answer to the growing necessity of the state to coordinate and integrate the intelligence community (SCHULTZE-KRAFT, 2012, p. 411).

All these advancements were coupled to US-GOC intelligence cooperation managed by a CIA program, and the efficiency of air power once articulated to precision guided bombs. The influx of information along with political will in both the US and Colombia due to common security interests were crucial to hit the FARC in previously inaccessible zones. Certainly, the Colombian Military Forces were able to get use to a changing security environment in a quick manner to, as well as to new offensive means product of US-GOC military cooperation. This capacity to adapt to demands emanated from general contexts was a chief strength of Colombian military structures in the period studied.

The result of such transformative initiatives produced by a sense of emergency proper of frustrated negotiations of the DZ brought a scenario of military strengthening, which produced positive strategic results in weakening the FARC.

² Better known as “Súper Tucano”.

³ In Spanish “Jefatura de Operaciones Especiales Conjuntas” (JOEC).

In a period of five years (2005-2012) top FARC leaders and key structures in political, militaristic, logistic and financial dimensions were beaten; thus, generating enough incentives and pressure for the guerrilla to advance towards a political settlement with the GOC. In this whole transition, the air power was a key element to curve the FARC's strategy to occupy large portions of the Colombian geography; attempting to do it with the logistic and financial advantages delivered by a wide knowledge and usage of well established arms and drug trafficking transnational networks.

Certainly, the peace agreement reached in 2016 between the GOC and the FARC will bring more changes in the Colombian Military Forces. For Tickner (2014), the expertise and learnt lessons acquired by Colombian Public Forces will be brought to regional and international scenarios, facilitated by a triangulated cooperation with the US that is already present in countries of Central America. The main objective of such enterprise is to offer training in coping with transnational crime (e.g. drug and arms trafficking) to foreign security corps, with US financing.

The effort for internationalizing the expertise of Colombian military and create links with the international community has gone to multilateral organizations too. In December 2016 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accepted the request of Colombia about establishing a bilateral dialogue to sign a cooperation agreement for exchanging information and fighting organized crime (Efe, 2016). Equally important is the desire of the GOC of making the Military Forces able to participate in Peace Operations abroad. The Ministry of Defense has taken steps in that direction through the Training Center for Peace Operations⁴ dependent of the Colombian Navy, where members of military forces are already being taught in courses of military observers and peacekeeping operations (SAUMETH, 2016).

Notwithstanding, inner Colombia threats to national security from organized crime, post-demobilized groups, FARC's dissidences, and the National Liberation Army⁵ (ELN) are still present in some regions. In order to address such issues, the Colombian Military Forces aim at occupying the historical rearguards of the FARC to avoid that other illegal groups establish their presence there, while combating FARC's dissidents, the ELN, and criminal bands (El País, 2016). This is a function already exerted by the Colombian security apparatus since the 1960s, in which has developed a remarkable expertise.

Finally, the front of post-conflict places an additional task to Colombian Public Forces in a humanitarian dimension, which even though was already present in Military Force's objectives; it will acquire a higher profile in the upcoming years.

⁴ In spanish is known as "Centro de Entrenamiento para Operaciones de Paz" (Cencopaz).

⁵ In spanish known as "Ejército de Liberación Nacional" (ELN).

In this sense, more resources and human capital can be dedicated in the military to give support to isolated communities; combating illegal and criminal mining; protecting environment and natural resources; building infrastructure; and decontaminating territories of landmines. With regard to these issues, during 2016 the Colombian Military Forces were already giving humanitarian support abroad due to natural disasters, such as the earthquake in Ecuador and the Hurricane in Haiti (El País, 2016); which means an expanded capacity and compromise to intervene in extraordinary situations. This entire trend speaks out about the doctrinaire articulation of international goods, such as human security⁶ and the protection of human rights and liberties in all aspects: the responsibility to protect⁷.

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⁶ Concept developed in the early 1990s by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), being a human-centered security concept which “means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival and dignity” (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2009, p. 5)

⁷ The term “responsibility to protect” was presented by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), established by Canada in the late 2001. The report establishes that sovereignty gives a State the right to “control” its affairs, as well as generates on the State the fundamental ‘responsibility’ for protecting the people within its borders. “It proposed that when a State fails to protect its people — either through lack of ability or a lack of willingness — the responsibility shifts to the broader international community” (United Nations, 2014).

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