

Colombia Back from the Brink

From Failed State to Exporter of Security

BY JUAN CARLOS PINZÓN

For most of the world, the decade of the 1990's came to a close with Europe agreeing on a single currency, the movie *Titanic* earning the distinction of being the most financially successful picture in history, and the world holding its breath for the predicted chaos that would supposedly be brought on by the Y2K bug.

For Colombia, the 1990's were marked by mounting violence, as the government struggled to protect rural communities from ever increasing attacks by armed insurgents and drug traffickers. Some even considered the country on the verge of becoming a failed state; the economy was foundering, foreign investment had declined sharply, and security had deteriorated to the point where the majority of Colombians did not feel safe.¹ In fact, they felt like hostages in their own homes. The security environment was one of constant anguish due to the terrorist bombing campaign initiated by the drug cartels and continued by Colombia's various armed Marxist insurgent groups.²

Colombians, who are proudly individualistic, resolute, and courageous, began to say "nunca mas" (never again), and their government listened and acted. Between 1999 and 2006, the first "transformation" of the Colombian Public Forces (the Armed Forces and the National Police) took place.³ The overhaul included intense training, revised military doctrine and campaign strategies, and increased capability and capacity. International cooperation and the recognition of shared responsibility to confront this countrywide threat were crucial in generating the needed jumpstart.

Every president since 1982 has attempted some sort of peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the Spanish acronym is FARC). After the 2002 election and at the end of another failed peace process with the FARC – that demilitarized an area of land the size of Switzerland, granting the FARC a safe haven as a gesture of good will during that negotiation period – the Colombian electorate clamored for the government to go on the offensive. The FARC leadership's lack of good faith, especially notable during the negotiation process between the

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years 1998 and 2002, led to a public loss of faith in the peace negotiations. Colombia had to adopt a new strategy to confront the conflict: first, the Colombian government developed measures to regain the strategic initiative against these insurgent groups; second, it developed options and implemented a plan to bring the conflict to a close and consolidate security across the nation; and finally, it formulated an approach to transform the forces to face future security challenges.

Charting a Path to a New Colombia

In the latter half of the 1990s, the guerrillas were capable of conducting multi-battalion size conventional set piece battles, and controlled large swaths of coca crop growing areas and drug routes, where they forced the displacement of entire towns and plundered civilians' property and assets.

By the end of the 1990s, President Andrés Pastrana and his administration designed a multilayer strategy to address, in a comprehensive way, the security challenges the country was confronting. Plan Colombia became an effort to strengthen the armed forces and confront the drugs trade in a way that enabled the state to enlarge its presence in an integrated manner to restore territorial control and enhance the rule of law. The U.S. partnered with Colombia in this endeavor in a way that facilitated air mobility, special operations training, intelligence capabilities, professional standards on human rights, and resources for rapid response for projects in critical areas. The support became bipartisan and sustained, and, despite limited resources, the impact became substantial.

In 2002, the new Colombian administration under President Alvaro Uribe initiated a series of offensive military actions that led to

the gradual, systematic, and sustained recovery of territorial control. They also launched an extensive interdiction campaign against drug trafficking, as well as economic revitalization efforts that began to rebuild the trust of Colombian citizens in their Public Forces across the country.

After taking the offensive initiative and establishing minimal state presence, FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) terrorist organizations went from being a nationwide threat to citizens and state sovereignty across 1,141,748 square kilometers of national territory, to isolated terrorist cells on the defensive in the most remote rural areas of the nation.

As security continued to improve and as the government expanded social services to outlying areas of the country, the illegal armed groups lost the ability to execute larger-scale operations. Now, the guerilla structures were forced to withdraw to their traditional base areas and scale down their tactics to harassment of security forces and attacks on economic infrastructure, as well as seeking new illegal sources of income.

Most importantly, because of stronger, modernized, and professional Armed Forces, Colombians gradually got their country back. For the first time in years, Colombians were able to move freely between cities and towns. With this recovered freedom came the reversal of the 1990s "brain drain," as both seasoned and skilled Colombian entrepreneurs, along with young energetic and resolute Colombians, came home. Another positive consequence of these initial successes was an increase in foreign investment and a more positive credit rating.

To fund the security effort, extraordinary appropriations were garnered through special war taxes and a reformed general tax system. The wealth tax was created in 2006 to fund the security campaign. Since then, this tax has raised approximately \$8 billion dollars for investments in assets to enhance security capabilities. U.S. support, which has been crucial for technology and know-how, has only accounted for an average 4 percent of defense budget; 96 percent or more has been funded by Colombians.

Increased domestic and international investments led to stronger and sustained budgets for the national security sector, enabling enhanced air mobility, improved training, increased manpower, and the creation of joint military task forces. By 2007, Colombia reached a turning point. The government forces were now almost wholly on the offensive, taking the fight to enemy, pursuing

decisive offensive engagements at the time and place of their choosing.

From 2007 to 2011, the Colombian Armed Forces inflicted debilitating blows on the FARC, ELN, and AUC. Their leaders were targeted; two of the seven members of the FARC Secretariat were killed in action. Adding to ongoing group demobilizations, individual demobilization and disarmament processes continued to increase. Leaders of the AUC who were not allowed to demobilize under these processes due to the nature of their crimes were either imprisoned or extradited to the United States. The statistical trends and indexes showed a huge reduction in the enemy's Order of Battle.

The consolidation policy's main objective was to achieve broader popular legitimacy through a "hearts and minds" campaign. The improved logistics capacity of the Armed Forces led to the construction of highways, bridges, parks, and indigenous villages.



Graffiti depicting FARC leaders Raul Reyes, Manuel Marulanda, and Ivan Rios

Following this mandate, in 2011, the National Defense Ministry, set out to enhance the last decade's achievements through a top to bottom review of the strategy. The result was the development of two new campaign plans: the military's "Sword of Honor" campaign, and a civilian security campaign, "Green Heart."

This new strategic vision emphasized the importance of flexibility and the ability to make "real-time" strategic adjustments, as the dynamic security battlespace in Colombia morphed and adapted. Emphasis was placed on innovation, interagency coordination, joint operations, and precision strikes. This approach of forward thinking and interagency collaboration was a way of maintaining the offensive initiative.

Twelve joint task forces were created and deployed against strategic FARC and ELN base areas of operation with specific missions of attacking the operational headquarters of both guerrilla organizations. Meanwhile in the cities, nine new metropolitan police commands were established and provided with their own respective security assets.

In 2012, President Santos announced that FARC had formally agreed to negotiate a peace deal based on a five-point agenda including land reform, political participation, drug trafficking, victims' rights, and the end of the internal armed conflict. The negotiations are being held in Havana, Cuba. As of this writing, substantial agreement has been reached on land reform, political participation, and drug trafficking. In recent days, further agreement has been reached on accountability for crimes committed during the civil war and on justice for victims. Concurrently, the National Defense Ministry's strategies aimed to conclusively dismantle all terrorist and criminal organizations, and bring justice where the illegal

groups continued to inflict indiscriminate violence against innocent men, women, and children.

Colombia's existential struggle against the twin threats of insurgency and powerful criminal organizations historically necessitated extensive cooperation between the military forces and the Colombia National Police. This collaborative relationship will be beneficial as the state continues to reclaim previously insurgent-controlled territory. Deepening the relationship with communities led to the creation of military liaisons for minorities and locals as well as the launching of police quadrant initiatives, dividing urban centers into 4,800 supervised blocks. As a result, terrorist and criminal groups were unable to undo the progress made by the Public Forces. Colombians began to enjoy the highest levels of security the country had experienced in over two decades.

The significant dismantling of the FARC's logistical, communications, and support networks, along with the decisive blocking of their transit and resupply corridors, further reduced their offensive capability and confined them to remote, difficult terrain areas.

Improved intelligence capabilities, improved land, air, and extensive riverine control, consecutive precision strikes, and advanced airmobile and combat capabilities further degraded and dispersed the terrorist groups geographically, and fragmented and eliminated main command and control structures. As a result, the number of individual FARC deserters increased dramatically. Demobilization of combatants reached an all-time high, further degrading the combat capabilities of FARC and ELN and decimating the enemy's Order of Battle. Further, FARC lost 54 of its most important leaders including two top commanders. During the same time, ELN

lost 21 of its leaders and the Criminal Bands (known as the Bacrim) 42 of theirs.

Since the implementation of Sword of Honor and Green Heart, security conditions have improved greatly. Criminal and terrorist actions continued to decline: the homicide rate declined, only eight percent of the population reported suffering from terrorist attacks, while kidnapping and murder rates plunged. Today, Colombia has reduced the homicide rate to its lowest level in 35 years. The perception of insecurity in Colombia's cities is similar to those of any peacetime large urban area around the world.

As the negotiations between the government and FARC continue in Havana, the Public Forces continue their offensive against FARC and ELN with an additional objective of degrading organized crime and smaller criminal groups active in Colombia's urban areas, thus making the cities safer.

Renewed emphasis has been placed on protecting the population, protecting infrastructure, and maintaining territorial control. Territorial control has expanded outwards to Colombia's borders. This significant change, restoring or establishing sovereignty, means the Public Force now controls enough internal territory to support activities that were once considered peacetime tasks. Such activities include: demining efforts, land restitution, designing the Armed Forces of the future through a transformation program, and social reinsertion of demilitarized insurgents, all now fully institutionalized programs on the national level. Concurrently, the Public Forces continue to play a vital role in protecting and defending human rights of all citizens and ensuring the security and reparation of conflict victims.

Despite the dramatic improvement in Colombia's circumstances over the past 15 years, Colombia still faces development and security challenges, most notably the lack of state presence in remote parts of the country and the likely evolution of the BACRIM and the drug trade. In the face of these challenges, the Armed Forces cannot be limited to strictly military operations. In the coming years, the National Defense Ministry anticipates that the Armed Forces will continue efforts to protect Colombia's citizens and sovereignty, support the development and improvement of infrastructure for rural economies, further international cooperation, and continue technological research and development - all components of the enduring mission to "Protect the Peace" and secure the Nation.

While the government of Colombia has made significant strides in reducing extreme poverty, many rural populations still lack basic services. Given the Public Forces' increasingly wide-reaching presence in remote rural areas, they are well positioned to assist other ministries and state agencies in the implementation of their social programs to help underserved and vulnerable populations. Additionally, Armed Forces as first responders have successfully mitigated the effects of recurrent natural disasters. There is a permanent Disaster and Emergency Battalion as part of the Engineering Brigade, which is an active asset within the National Environmental Risk Management System.

Recognizing the value of nested opportunities, the Defense Ministry aims to better integrate research and development efforts with those of the private sector and the academic community. To this end, the private and defense sectors are jointly developing technologies to gain self-sufficiency and improve

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parts and equipment replacement with domestically produced products. The current step involves developing an indigenous armaments and military hardware industry to increase self-reliance.

Only a decade ago, it was difficult to imagine that one day the Colombian Public Forces would be in a position to share their expertise, experience, and training capabilities to assist other nations in building security, peacekeeping, and transnational crime prevention programs, many of which have been launched by the United Nations or through a NATO mandate. Because of the sustained progress since the turn of the century, and their exceptional expertise and experience, the Colombian Armed Forces are well positioned to evolve into a regional leader in training, education, and actively participate in international peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster

relief missions around the globe. Colombia's experience successfully combating insurgent groups, illicit facilitators, transnational criminal organizations, and drug trafficking organizations, makes it uniquely capable and qualified to assist other nations that today, or one day, may face similar threats. Over the past five years Colombian armed forces have trained almost 24,000 police and military from more than 60 nations, thus, making Colombia a consistent security partner for Central America, Caribbean, and other friendly nations.

A Colombia for Colombians

Though Colombia has made tremendous strides protecting and defending its nation, a signed peace agreement with FARC will not end all violence, drug trafficking, illegal mining, extortion, kidnapping, murders, or criminal acts against the civilian population, but it



Pedro Szekely/Flickr

Rainbow over Guatavita, Colombia

will end a significant portion of it. With a signed agreement, as with any other significant change in the strategic scenario, the Public Forces must adapt, modernize, and strengthen themselves.

Not only will the Armed Forces play a key role in maintaining security so that whatever is agreed upon in Havana is enforced and executed in a secure, sustained, and legal manner, they will be tasked with the protection of Colombia's borders, natural resources, infrastructure, and citizen security. If FARC disarms and demobilizes, under-governed areas of the country will remain vulnerable to security threats posed by the remaining insurgent and criminal entities. Thus, the Public Forces will need to be and are prepared to fill this void.

The Colombian military and police have shown that they can successfully combat the tactics, techniques, and procedures of insurgents, terrorists, and criminal organizations. They must now maintain the momentum to be able to handle the future fluctuations of the security environment. They have proven that with bold decisions and a strong political will, combined with successful international relations and cooperation, institutional development, and joint and coordinated efforts, a troubled country can recover and turn the tide. To face future security challenges like transnational crime, they must now stand ready to build networks, capabilities, and capacities against new and emerging threats. Particularly, in the new age of cyber warfare, Colombia must be prepared to tackle 21st century threats while continuing to consolidate an enduring peace. Colombia, led by its Armed Forces is now poised to face any aggressor whether they are nation states, organizations, or even individuals, in any battlespace, to include cyber, at any time. As the last half a century has

illustrated, the Colombian people and the Public Forces who protect them are up to the task.

Thus, going forward, with honor, pride, and resolve, the Military and the National Police are ready, willing, and able to protect the peace against present and future threats.

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Notes

¹ Ann C. Mason. "Colombian State Failure: The Global Context of Eroding Domestic Authority," Paper presented at the Conference on Failed States, Florence, Italy (April 10-14, 2001). http://www.comm.ucsb.edu/faculty/mstohl/failed_states/2001/papers/mason.pdf.

² Colombia had two major communist insurgent groups active through the 1990s: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). A reactionary paramilitary force also developed, the United Self-Defense [Groups] of Colombia (AUC), born out of the 1980's hitmen squads of the drug cartels, whose task initially was to protect relatives of cartel kingpins from being kidnapped by the leftist insurgents.

³ Though the Colombian National Police is distinct from the military forces of Colombia, it constitutes along with them the Public Force and is controlled by the Ministry of Defense.



The Beast carries half a million immigrants from Central America to the U.S. border each year.