

ONE GOAL, TWO STRUGGLES:

Confronting Crime and
Violence in Mexico
and Colombia



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Cover photo: Members of Mexico's Federal Investigative Agency (AFI) arrest men on suspicion of drug possession during an anti-narcotics operation in the Morelos district in Mexico City June 26, 2007. Mexico demoted 284 federal police chiefs, the security ministry said on Monday in the government's latest attempt to contain a bloody drug war. REUTERS/Daniel Aguilar (MEXICO)

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Introduction

BY CYNTHIA J. ARNISON AND ERIC L. OLSON
WITH CHRISTINE ZAINO*

Transnational criminal organizations trafficking drugs from Mexico to the United States have existed since the Prohibition era in the United States. But the violence associated with this trafficking—and related movements of other illicit goods as well as undocumented migrants—increased exponentially beginning in the mid-2000s, threatening Mexico’s national security. During the six-year administration of President Felipe Calderón (2006-12) estimates of those killed in drug-related violence reached 70,000, with an additional 20,000 “disappeared.” The upsurge in violence in many areas of the country reflected a combination of fighting between rival drug trafficking organizations seeking territorial control of criminal markets and dominance of lucrative trafficking corridors, as well as clashes between the traffickers and government security forces. By 2010, some Mexican cities registered homicide rates that were among the highest in the world and the public began to seriously doubt the government’s strategy and its ability to guarantee public safety.

The scope of the violence and its frequently gruesome and shocking character, and the government’s seeming inability to bring it under control, brought forth memories of an earlier period in Latin America, when Colombia was besieged by the violence of the Medellín and Cali drug trafficking cartels. The Colombian crisis of the 1980s and ’90s involved multiple ways the state was losing ground to guerrilla and paramilitary groups in addition to drug traffickers. But like Mexico, the cost in human lives and government legitimacy was huge.

* We are grateful to Verónica Colón-Rosario of the Latin American Program for her superb editorial assistance and supervision of all stages of this publication.

Over the course of more than a decade, Colombia's security situation has improved dramatically. With significant international cooperation, the guerrillas have been weakened militarily and coca cultivation and cocaine production have been reduced. Most analysts agree that at least some of the security crisis in Mexico (as well as Central America) is due to ways that security advances and improvements in state capacity in Colombia forced traffickers to search for new smuggling routes and ways to market their illicit product. This is true even though, as several chapters in this publication indicate, organized criminal groups remain an important source of instability in Colombia, having mutated and fragmented in response to government pressure. Former paramilitary fighters, who demobilized in the early 2000s as a result of peace talks with the government, are important actors in the new manifestations of organized crime.

Colombia is now a major player in South-South security cooperation, offering training to over 2,500 Mexican military and police officials between 2010 and 2012, as well as to over 5,000 members of the security forces from Central America and the Caribbean and over 2,000 from South America during the same time period.¹ A former director of the Colombian National Police, General Óscar Naranjo, served as an adviser to the administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. The United States funds some of Colombia's programs abroad and U.S. officials have expressed satisfaction and pride in Colombia's success. In a May 2013 visit to Colombia, Vice President Biden paid "personal tribute" to President Santos and "the people of Colombia for the remarkable, remarkable progress you've made..." in dealing with the country's security concerns. Biden went on to mention Colombia's training of "thousands of law enforcement officers and security officers from over 40 countries since 2009."²

But precisely what aspects of Colombia's strategy and tactics for fighting organized crime in its own territory offer useful lessons for Mexico? What might Colombia's steps and missteps offer by way of example or counter-example? What is unique about each case such that comparisons are misleading? What do current security challenges in Colombia suggest about the threat posed by organized crime more generally?

To reflect on these questions, the Latin American Program commissioned a series of papers from international experts with a wealth of experience on

issues of security, violence, and transnational criminal organizations. This publication includes two chapters analyzing the usefulness of comparing Colombia and Mexico's experiences in combatting organized crime, as well as the potential for using Colombia's successes as lessons for Mexico's security strategy. *Maria Victoria Llorente* of Fundación Ideas para la Paz and *Jeremy McDermott* of Insight Crime argue that Colombia does not represent a ready template for Mexico's fight against violence and organized crime, although its long experience may provide insight into Mexico's future. The second paper, by *Raúl Benítez Manaut*, a researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), contends that Colombia does offer positive lessons about how reform of the defense sector and professionalization of the police can yield measureable results for Mexico. Commentaries by *Marta Lucía Ramírez de Rincón*, former Minister of Defense of Colombia, and *John Bailey* of Georgetown University, deepen and take issue with the analyses provided by Llorente and McDermott and Benítez.

In their chapter on "Colombia's Lessons for Mexico," Llorente and McDermott caution against seeing Colombia as a security model for Mexico and believe that both countries "have a long list of successes—and failures—on which to draw from each other." The authors argue that "the historic dynamics of the conflict and violence in these two countries share few similarities, as the drug trade in Colombia has been inextricably linked with its civil conflict." They maintain that Colombia has had numerous "tactical victories"—the killing of Pablo Escobar and the dismantling of the Cali cartel—along with reductions in coca cultivation, cocaine production, and trafficking in precursor chemicals. But they say that "Colombia's great successes have been against the Marxist rebels, more in the context of a counterinsurgent war than a war on drugs." The latter is not "close to victory," they argue, at least not yet. To the contrary, criminal syndicates linked to former paramilitary groups, known by their acronym BACRIM (*bandas criminales*), along with the FARC and ELN guerrillas, have deepened their involvement in the drug trade and represent new manifestations of insecurity and violence.

An even more important example for Mexico, Llorente and McDermott maintain, is Colombia's decades-long experience with the transformation of

drug trafficking organizations in response to sustained pressure from the security forces; that is, “how different groups have evolved, fragmented, and re-constituted themselves into networks; how criminal organizations have militarized.” The authors suggest that Mexico better “anticipate the evolution of organized crime” in order to protect national security. Llorente and McDermott see high levels of impunity in Mexico and Colombia as a common problem and therefore that a common solution can be found in “a strong presence of state institutions throughout the country, an effective justice system and law enforcement, educational and economic opportunities to provide alternatives to illicit activities, all reinforced by transparency to undermine the corrupting influence of drug money.”

Raúl Benítez, in “Mexico-Colombia: U.S. Assistance and the Fight against Organized Crime,” also details the many divergences between Mexico and Colombia, both in the security challenges they face as well as key institutional and political differences within their security structures. Colombia’s history of violence developed an ongoing culture of “war” from the 1950s on, which paved the way for a “war on drugs” approach that was politically acceptable to the public. Similarly, Colombia embraced the language of “narco-terrorism” in its fight against drug traffickers. Mexico on the other hand, has rejected the characterization of drug traffickers as terrorists and has struggled with the “drug war” rhetoric.

Despite these and other differences between the two cases—rural versus urban focus of criminal activities, production versus trafficking elements of the cocaine supply chain, and different experiences with human rights abuses—Benítez believes that Colombia does hold “positive lessons” for Mexico, both centered on institutions. The first lesson is Colombia’s reform of the national defense sector, including the appointment of civilians to head the Defense Ministry. Second, he cites Colombia’s professional National Police as a model for Mexico and notes that the success of the police in reducing crime in large urban areas helped to generate public support for President Álvaro Uribe’s overall security strategy. The Mexican case is different, Benítez argues, because police reform took place in the midst of rising crime and homicides, leading to a generalized sense of fear and rejection of the security strategy by Mexican elites. Finally, Benítez highlights other key differences between the two countries: Colombia’s

defense budget is the largest in Latin America, its military is over twice as large as Mexico's in per capita terms, and Colombia has more of its police force centralized under federal command, whereas Mexico's is very decentralized.

Marta Lucía Ramírez de Rincón's commentary, "Drug Trafficking: A National Security Threat—Similarities between Colombia and Mexico," begins with an overview of the havoc wreaked by drug trafficking organizations on Colombian society, politics, and security in the 1980s and '90s. She details numerous acts of terrorism, including the bombings of government agencies and a civilian airliner and the assassination of government ministers, political leaders (including presidential candidates), judges, magistrates, and journalists. The decision to keep the country's military intentionally weak in order to prevent coups had powerful consequences, she argues, in that the state was unable to prevent the growth of organized crime and guerrilla groups. As "drug trafficking organizations began to grow and feel ever more powerful, they began their penetration of Colombian society, first via infiltration of the political class and later through threats, extortion, and the blatant corruption of officials in various state institutions." Non-state armed actors, including drug trafficking organizations and guerrilla and paramilitary groups, posed existential threats to Colombia's national security and democratic regime.

Building on a substantial increase in the security and defense budget during the administration of President Andrés Pastrana, the Uribe government's Democratic Security Policy (DSP) continued the expansion of the armed forces to combat the full range of non-state armed actors. In addition to cooperation with the United States via Plan Colombia, she notes the importance of domestic resources mobilized via a "wealth tax" in order to finance improvements in the military's size, professionalization, and technological capacity. Ramírez details broad processes of consultation within and across government ministries and with academia, the private sector, and others in civil society in the development of the DSP's comprehensive vision, which held that "military action had to be complemented by judicial reform that would guarantee the superiority of the state over actors in the conflict and over terrorism." Over time, she says, the security forces achieved a permanent presence on the highways and in

rural areas and towns, shifting from reaction to prevention and “the better protection of citizens’ lives and liberty.”

Echoing a conclusion of Llorente and McDermott, Ramírez notes that following the collapse of the major drug trafficking cartels and the demobilization of paramilitary groups, “the police, the justice system, and other state agencies failed to react adequately, thereby allowing smaller, harder to detect groups to take over the business.” She argues that like Colombia, Mexico initially “misdiagnosed” its problem with organized crime and proposes that Mexican society debate the advantages and disadvantages of classifying violent drug traffickers as terrorists in order to give the government additional tools to combat them. Based on Colombia’s experience, Ramírez recommends that Mexico “come to agreement on the nature of the problem and develop an action plan with the participation of the security forces, civil society, and academia, with unequivocal leadership from the president at the national level as well as the capacity for local action.” She also calls for international cooperation to identify criminal networks and their modes of operation along all stages of the value chain, indicating that “Mexican and Colombian organizations have become truly transnational organized criminal enterprises that present serious threats beyond national borders.”

In his commentary “What Can Mexico Learn from Colombia to Combat Organized Crime?” *John Bailey* argues that beyond focusing on the two countries’ shared problem of drug trafficking and violence, it is important to consider “how these issues affect democratic processes and state institutions;” that is, “the ways in which the trafficking organizations engage with other types of criminal groups to penetrate and transform” the institutions of the democratic state. Bailey advocates looking not only at the “tools and techniques” that Colombia may have to offer Mexico, but also how the “contexts and constraints” in each country impact their ability to share strategies or tactics. Like Benítez, Bailey cautions against the “militarization of the fight against organized crime” through a conflation of drug-related violence with insurgency and terrorism, even though he allows that over time, insurgent groups in Colombia have come “to resemble profit-oriented criminal organizations.”

Bailey sees as the major difference between Colombia and Mexico the fact that “after 1992 the Colombian government built a much bigger security toolbox and developed more effective tools” by investing heavily in its defense budget and strengthening its armed forces and police. He goes on to offer both positive and negative lessons from the Colombian experience. Among the positive lessons he notes are efforts to think in strategic terms; improvements in inter-agency coordination, including between the armed forces and police; reform and strengthening of the National Police; and improvements in intelligence and mobility. Among the negative lessons are the priority attached to “high-value targets” as opposed to “the middle rungs of trafficking organizations;” the weakness of the judiciary; and the absence of a long-term vision for citizen security which emphasizes prevention.

Overall, Bailey recommends caution in drawing too tight a comparison between Mexico’s and Colombia’s security challenges, arguing as well for more research on the interactions between government officials and criminal groups and their impact on democratization and the state.

Endnotes

- 1 According to Colombian Ministry of Defense figures, these included 1,008 police and military from Honduras, 563 from Guatemala, 357 from Costa Rica, 242 from El Salvador, 205 from the Dominican Republic, 974 from Ecuador, and 592 from Peru.
- 2 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks to the Press by Vice President Biden and Colombian President Santos,” Casa de Nariño, Bogotá, Colombia, May 27, 2013.



Colombia's Lessons for Mexico

BY MARÍA VICTORIA LLORENTE AND JEREMY McDERMOTT

INTRODUCTION

Both Colombia and Mexico are embroiled in drug-fuelled violence. Both countries face an array of diverse and powerful criminal syndicates, from street gangs to transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). Colombia has been fighting its war against powerful drug trafficking cartels since the early 1980s, while the battle against insurgent groups dates back to the early 1960s. Both TCOs and rebels fund themselves through criminal activities, including the narcotics trade and increasingly, illegal mining. Mexico advanced to an all-out war against its drug cartels after President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006, although aspects of the government's security strategy are being reformulated under the new government of Enrique Peña Nieto, inaugurated in December 2012.

Some commentators have described the situation in Mexico as a “Colombianization,” while others have described the violence in Mexico as a “narco-insurgency.” Washington has held up Colombia as a success story in the war on drugs and transnational organized crime, arguing that this Andean nation has a great deal to teach Mexico. In September 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated that Mexico is “looking more and more like Colombia looked 20 years ago,” and that the Mexican

drug cartels “are showing more and more indices of insurgencies.”¹ This was followed by a statement from the then-chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, who said during a visit to Colombia: “There’s a great deal to be learned from the success that has been seen here in Colombia.”² In February of 2011 the theme was picked up again by then-Undersecretary of the Army Joseph Westphal, who told the University of Utah’s Hinckley Center for Politics that “there is a form of insurgency in Mexico with the drug cartels that’s right on our border.”³

Colombia has had success in dismantling some of the most powerful criminal organizations in the world, such as the Medellín, Cali, and Norte del Valle cartels; it has reduced drug crop production; it has beaten back Marxist guerrillas which had threatened the viability of the state at the end of the 1990s; its policy of killing “high value targets” (HVTs) has removed the top leadership of certain criminal and rebel groups; it has worked hand-in-hand with U.S. authorities, extraditing hundreds of drug traffickers; and it has reduced homicide and kidnapping rates significantly over the last decade. Indeed, many credit the significant security advances over the last decade with creating the conditions for the peace talks between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which formally opened in Oslo, Norway in August 2012 and continue in Havana, Cuba.

However, the situations in Colombia and Mexico are very different and it would be a mistake to think that Colombia provides a ready template for Mexico. The historic dynamics of the conflict and violence in these two countries share few similarities, as the drug trade in Colombia has been inextricably linked with its civil conflict. Of course, Colombia has experience it can share with Mexico. Colombia has had an enormous number of tactical victories—taking down Pablo Escobar, dismantling the Cali cartel, and extraditing a whole generation of major drug traffickers. However, strategically speaking, it is difficult to view the war on drugs in Colombia as anything close to a victory, yet. Drug cultivation has been reduced, but this has been in part offset by a higher alkaloid yield per hectare of coca, i.e. higher purity cocaine. In addition, the integrated, hierarchical cartels no longer exist, but they have been replaced with more fluid networks that re-form every time a component or cell is removed.⁴

Mexico's drug war is all about territory, particularly the coveted ground that lies along the border with the United States. Territoriality is not the driving force behind Colombian violence today, although it has relevance. Groups in Colombia have fought for access to and control of drug crops, internal movement corridors, and embarkation points, but that fight has been much reduced since the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which was completed in 2006. There are still disputes over access to the big Colombian ports – and the thousands of containers moved through them every day – some of which host cocaine consignments.

Only by understanding Colombia's civil conflict can one understand the country's drug trade. In 1980, coca crops began to emerge in force in Colombia, and by around 1997 Colombia became the primary producer of cocaine in the world. Since the 1980s and the exponential rise in the cocaine traded by Pablo Escobar, drug traffickers have been central actors in near five decades of civil conflict. This is not the case in Mexico. While Mexico has had small guerrilla groups – the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) and the now dormant Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) – they are not players in the drug-fuelled violence, nor involved in any significant way in drug trafficking, unlike their Colombian counterparts of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

It could be argued that Mexico will actually have more to teach Colombia. Since 2008, with the extradition of the leadership of the AUC and the subsequent reduction of the ideological conflict between Colombia's belligerent groups, the situation in the Andean nation is looking more like that of Mexico and less like a traditional insurgency. As the domestic drug market grows in Colombia, so the war between gangs for territorial control and distribution points in urban neighborhoods increases.

This chapter argues that while Mexico and Colombia share most, if not all, of the symptoms of drug-fuelled violence, the conditions that generate this violence are very different. The solutions, however, may be similar: a strong presence of state institutions throughout the country; an effective justice system; and law enforcement, educational, and economic opportunities to provide alternatives to illicit activities, all reinforced by transparency to undermine the corrupting influence of drug money. Unfortunately,

Colombia does not yet have these conditions fully in place, and therefore cannot be a model for Mexico.

What Colombia does provide is a lesson in how organized crime can mutate under pressure from the security forces: how different groups have evolved, fragmented, and re-constituted themselves into networks; how criminal organizations have militarized. In these areas, there are lessons that Mexico can learn from Colombia, and perhaps better prepare its government to anticipate the evolution of the organized crime that presents a direct threat to national security.

This paper will first look at the development and then achievements of Colombia's security policy, beginning with President Álvaro Uribe. It will be argued that many of these achievements were part of a counterinsurgency war rather than a war on drugs, and therefore less applicable to Mexico. The second part of the paper will look at how organized crime in Colombia has responded to security force pressure and how these organizations have evolved into the criminal networks which today dominate the cocaine trade in the country.

Colombia's Successes

In the late 1990s Colombia was one of the most violent nations in the world and was often considered, if not a failed state, then one stumbling in that direction. High levels of violence and human rights violations were linked to the four-decade old armed conflict, which had intensified in the 1980s and '90s thanks to the influx of cash from the cocaine industry. Irregular armed groups, from left-wing guerrillas to self-proclaimed right-wing paramilitaries, challenged the state's control over vast areas of the country.

With the FARC rebels able to amass up to 1,500 fighters in one place to attack military installations and even a provincial capital,⁵ Colombians placed their hopes on the 1999 peace process led by President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). The collapse of this dialogue in 2002 resulted in the election later that year of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, a political outsider who promised to wage all-out war on the insurgency.

Over two administrations (2002–06 and 2006–10), Uribe implemented a new security strategy dubbed the Democratic Security Policy (DSP). The strategy centered on recovering state authority and providing security to the Colombian people in order to regain investor confidence and thus propel the country's development forward. The DSP relied heavily on resources provided by the U.S. government through Plan Colombia and on the military reforms initiated by former president Pastrana, both of which began in 2000.

The Colombian public widely embraced the DSP after it achieved significant reductions in violence, crime, and kidnapping as well as other improvements in security, which propelled President Uribe's re-election to a second term.⁶ The DSP also received international acceptance as the result of a U.S. effort to portray the DSP as an unmatched success in the war against narco-trafficking and terrorism.

The successes of the DSP have led many, in different situations and contexts, to idealize it as the recipe for regaining state authority and reducing violence.

Understanding the Democratic Security Policy

The DSP had two parallel agendas, both of which were aimed at countering the country's main illegal armed groups: the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and drug traffickers. The first agenda consisted of a peace process with the paramilitary structures of the AUC. This process led to the demobilization of thousands of AUC troops between 2003 and 2006 and opened the door to a complex and controversial period of facilitating justice, truth, and victim reparation in the country, which is still underway, although proceeding at a glacial pace.

This chapter, known as the Justice and Peace process, was established under the framework of Law 975 of 2005 (better known as the *Ley de Justicia y Paz*, or the Justice and Peace Law). In very simple terms, the law serves as a mechanism of transitional justice that grants judicial benefits (reduced sentences of five to eight years) to paramilitary leaders “for crimes committed while belonging to an illegal armed group,” on the condition that they agree to stop all criminal activity, tell the full truth about the crimes they committed (and the power structures enabling them), and hand over their assets to pay for the reparation of victims.

The second agenda of the DSP had counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics aspects set out in the two main security-related documents of Uribe's administration: the Defense and Democratic Security Policy and the Consolidation of Democratic Security Policy, issued by the Ministry of Defense in 2003 and 2007, respectively.

These counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics policies were aimed at "strengthening and guaranteeing the rule of law in the whole country through the enhancement of democratic authority."⁷ The policy encompassed simultaneous efforts to strengthen and modernize the military, police, and intelligence capacity of security forces. This became possible thanks to a considerable increase in the security and defense budget, initiated by President Pastrana and continued through the two Uribe administrations⁸ and by President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-present), financed by extraordinary resources provided under the banner of Plan Colombia as well as through a new tax on wealth known as the "War Tax."

The implementation of the DSP began by prioritizing areas based on the presence of insurgent groups and the need to consolidate the state's control over that territory. The first phase (2002-07) involved launching a series of military operations focused on territorial control that for the first time included joint combat units (army, air force, and navy) as well as the extensive use of air capacity and of special forces comprised of professional soldiers⁹ and equipped for high mobility.¹⁰

Operations were concentrated in three types of regions:

- The principal highways which, since the end of the 1990s, had been affected by piracy and the FARC's strategy of indiscriminately kidnapping civilians (*Plan Meteoro*);
- The focal points of national political and economic power. In this case the military and police carried out numerous offensives to: a) break the stranglehold that the FARC had sought to create around Bogotá in the department of Cundinamarca (*Operations Libertad I and II of Plan Patriota*); b) cripple the guerrillas in Antioquia, a strategic department both geographically and economically (*Operation Marcial of Plan*

Patriota); and c) clear the guerrillas from Medellín, the capital of Antioquia and second biggest city in the country (*Operation Orión*);

- The FARC's strategic rearguard, in the jungles in the southeastern departments of Caquetá, Meta, and Guaviare, an area which at that time was one of the centers of coca production. In this case the biggest military offensive in the country was launched with 17,000 troops, aiming at a final victory against the rebels in this region (*Operation J.M. of Plan Patriota*).

Simultaneously, a plan was developed to enhance the presence of the police, especially in rural areas. This included a program to build 160 reinforced police stations,¹¹ many of which had been abandoned after FARC offensives in the mid-1990s in which the guerrillas aimed at clearing the police presence out of the municipalities they dominated. In addition, Mobile Police Squads (known by their Spanish acronym, EMCAR) were created, with 9,000 officers trained specifically for operations in rural areas; they aimed to dismantle narco-guerrilla networks, support the eradication of illegal drug crops, carry out interdiction operations, destroy labs, and protect economic infrastructure.¹²

As a result of the government's strategic revision, which acknowledged the capacity of insurgent groups to adapt to initiatives promoted by the DSP, the policy was modified and a second phase was put in motion (2007-10). In this phase, the goal was to maintain the gains of police and military efforts in terms of territorial control. Regionally-focused plans, based on the Integral Action Doctrine, were developed.¹³ The most notable of these was the Integrated Consolidation Plan for La Macarena (PCIM, *Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena*), focused on the Sierra de la Macarena (Meta department, south of Bogotá). This area had long been a bulwark of the FARC and also had a strong tradition of coca cultivation and cocaine production. This, along with its historical importance for the FARC, made it the target of intense military operations aimed at destroying guerrilla structures and leadership and eradicating coca fields as part of Plan Patriota.

The PCIM started in 2007 as a pilot project seeking to integrate stabilization and control strategies (military, police, and judicial) with measures to create

conditions for social and economic development.¹⁴ The implementation of the social component—one of the primary innovations of this intervention, supported by European and U.S. resources—was carried out with the goal of guaranteeing the well-being of the farmers whose illicit crops had been eradicated. Projects of mid- and long-term development were introduced.

As this plan was implemented—not without difficulty—the government prepared the so-called Strategic Leap, defined in Presidential Directive No. 01 of March 2009. It offered precise instructions on how to carry out integrated interventions in 12 strategic areas, with the purpose of “reasserting the creation of security conditions, with irreversible effects, looking to enhance the necessary conditions to achieve a sustainable consolidation of the state while considering territorial particularities.”

In 2007, between the two phases of the DSP outlined above, a parallel strategy was carried out that focused on so-called High-Value Targets (HVTs). Accordingly, a series of sophisticated operations based on intelligence were put in motion. Important members of the FARC’s leadership were killed, putting an end to the myth of their invulnerability, and civilians who had been held in captivity for years in remote jungle areas by the FARC were rescued.¹⁵ Notably, many of these operations were carried out thanks to coordination between the military and the police, something unthinkable a few years before due to the longstanding rivalry between these forces.

Successes of the Democratic Security Policy

The DSP has been touted as a successful strategy by both the Colombian and U.S. governments. However, the statistics and arguments used to demonstrate its achievements say little about the extent of the policy’s success or its sustainability. Implementation of the DSP reached its peak in 2008. That year, several FARC leaders were killed—prompting the military to start speaking of “the end of the end” of the guerrillas;¹⁶ and 18 major drug traffickers, most of them demobilized paramilitary commanders, were extradited to the United States.

Simultaneously, transformations in the structure of irregular armed groups became apparent and some crime and violence indicators worsened—

though never to the levels of the late 1990s. The regression was noticeable in some critical regions previously considered pacified, such as the city of Medellín. This certainly calls into question the irreversibility of the successes of the policy.

The successes and the reach of DSP can be viewed in three ways: 1) its impact on insurgent groups and organized crime; 2) its results in terms of the war against drugs; and 3) the strengthening of institutions in terms of state control of national territory.

Weakening the Insurgency...

Without the “End of the End” of the Internal Armed Conflict

Perhaps the most obvious success of the DSP has been the weakening of the FARC. In addition to diminishing the impact of the internal armed conflict overall, the blows against the FARC had a major impact on decreasing homicide rates as well as significantly reducing kidnapping for ransom; the latter dropped by more than 90 percent between 2002 and 2012. Historically, the vast majority of kidnappings have been carried out by guerrillas.¹⁷ The rebels abandoned the practice of kidnapping in February 2012,¹⁸ fulfilling one of the government preconditions for sitting down to peace talks.

The FARC, the most influential insurgent group and the main target of the DSP, has suffered a major strategic defeat when measured against the situation in the 1990s. Their numbers were halved between 2002 and 2010, from 16,000 fighters down to 8,000. They were pushed back from their positions around the major urban areas into the mountains in the center of the country and into the jungles to the south and southeast. Their offensive capacity was significantly reduced: whereas in the 1990s the FARC were able to amass up to 1,500 fighters to attack major targets, now most actions are carried out by units less than eight strong. The rebels have been forced back from a strategic advance to traditional guerrilla hit-and-run attacks. The military seized the initiative during this period,¹⁹ and the FARC, thanks to desertions and killings, saw a reduction not only in overall numbers but in the quality of its leadership, with the loss of irreplaceable veterans.²⁰

Nevertheless, the so-called “end of the end” of the FARC has not materialized. In 2008, with the death of FARC founder and leader “Manuel Marulanda” (whose real name was Pedro Marín), and the promotion of “Alfonso Cano” (Guillermo León Sáenz), the FARC began to make some major changes to their strategy and tactics, adapting to the new conditions of the conflict imposed by the DSP. These changes were presented in Cano’s “Plan Rebirth,” put in motion in mid-2008, and its follow-up “Plan 2010,” delivered to rebel units in late 2009. The new rebel tactics became characterized by an extensive use of explosives, anti-personnel landmines, and snipers, all employed by small combat units in hit-and-run attacks, often with rebels dressed in civilian clothing.²¹ Furthermore, they substituted kidnappings, an important source of income, for extortion, which has seen a significant rise over the past few years. After a continuous fall since 2004, reported cases of extortion have increased steadily, from a low point of 830 cases in 2008 to 2,330 in 2012—a level similar to that in the early 2000s.²²

What occurred in the latter half of 2010—and has continued to the present—is that both the FARC and ELN (a second, smaller leftist armed movement) have retaken the initiative in certain parts of the country. Their guerrilla tactics, war of attrition, and use of militiamen living among the local communities have again changed the dynamics of the ongoing conflict, and this time it is the state that has been slow to adjust. This does not mean that the rebels have moved any closer to their stated objective of overthrowing the state (which seems all but impossible), but it does mean that they have once again shown an enormous capacity to adapt, to inflict damage on infrastructure, and to target state security forces. Indeed, figures compiled by the non-governmental organization Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris demonstrate that total casualty figures for members of the security forces in 2012 were similar to those in 2002, when the rebels were at the height of their power: while combat deaths were down by half, the number of those wounded had increased.²³

The battlefield has also changed somewhat. Whereas in the 1990s the eastern plains and southern jungles were the scenes of most significant FARC activity, in 2010 through 2012 the fighting shifted to the departments along the Pacific coast, where then-FARC commander-in-chief Alfonso Cano operated until his death at the hands of troops in November 2011. With

the promotion of “Timochenko” (the alias of Rodrigo Londoño), this trend has continued, although there has also been an increase in activity in Norte de Santander along the Venezuelan border, where Timochenko has long been based. The control of routes to the Pacific has long been a strategic objective of the FARC, which they paradoxically achieved as a result of the intense military operations against their rearguard in the east and the south, forcing them to withdraw and redeploy troops and thwarting the aim of the architects of Plan Patriota.

The Demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)

An unquestionable success of the 2002-06 peace process between the state and paramilitary groups was the radical drop in homicides and massacres, as well as the decrease in forced internal displacements of the population. Many studies have shown how this pacification strategy was crucial for reversing the pattern in homicide rates, which had been rising since 1998 before undergoing a significant decline between 2003 and 2005.²⁴ This period coincides with the AUC peace process, which began in December 2002 and ended with the demobilization of more than 30,000 members in 2006.

Unfortunately, this success, while significant, was only temporary and limited to the period in which the peace process was carried out.²⁵ In the case of forced internal displacement, the effect only lasted until 2005, when rates began to rise once again, although they never again reached the levels of 2000 and 2001 when the phenomenon was at its peak.

Violence rates grew after 2006, despite Uribe's claims, because the peace process with the AUC was unable to fully dismantle the paramilitary groups. In early 2006, the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia of the Organization of American States (MAPP/OEA) reported that the areas formerly controlled by the AUC were beginning to host a new threat: demobilized paramilitaries had regrouped into criminal bands that controlled specific communities and illegal business; the groups that did not demobilize remained untouched; and new armed groups had emerged and others had gained strength where the demobilized groups had once operated.²⁶

Furthermore, some NGOs reported that since 2008, local and regional power structures linked to the paramilitaries had not disappeared and were instead taken over by the so-called criminal bands (known by the government as BACRIM, an acronym for *bandas criminales*), which appeared under a variety of designations throughout the country shortly after the demobilization of the AUC.²⁷

Thus, as the peace process with the paramilitaries was underway, a new scenario of insecurity was developing in Colombia as criminal syndicates linked to the AUC—the BACRIM—began to carve out space in Colombia's conflict. Even if some of the BACRIM had little to do with the peace process with the AUC, most are criminal heirs of the paramilitaries, without the AUC's counterinsurgent façade.

There is a debate in Colombia regarding the nature of the BACRIM. Some analysts²⁸ have claimed they are “neo-paramilitary” groups, given the blatant continuity with AUC-style paramilitarism, while the Uribe administration claimed they were new forms of organized crime (which is why, at first, the government branded them as “emergent criminal bands”). While the debate continues, what is clear is that the true paramilitaries, with all this designation implies—such as links to the military and state institutions and political ideology—are all but gone from Colombia, although the last remaining BACRIM, the Urabeños, appear to be seeking political recognition and negotiations.²⁹ This new chapter in the story of narco-paramilitary and organized crime syndicates, characterized by networks of atomized groups fighting over control of illegal businesses, will be discussed in greater depth below.³⁰ Indeed, with the removal of their ideological component, it might be argued that today's BACRIM now look a lot more like their Mexican counterparts.

The DSP did not manage to contain the phenomenon of the BACRIM, although in 2011 the government designated them as a national security priority. The police have experienced important tactical successes against the BACRIM: arrests related to these criminal syndicates rose dramatically from 689 in 2006 to 4,497 in 2012.³¹ Also, at least six of the top-level BACRIM leaders, whose names have appeared on most-wanted lists in Colombia and the United States, were captured or killed between 2007 and 2012.³²

The military and police high commands acknowledge that the BACRIM are Colombia's main security threat³³ and are responsible for the uptick in homicides, massacres, forced displacements, and extortions from 2009-12. Moreover, they are one of the primary sources of corruption in the security and justice sectors, as shown in the many cases of employees of these institutions in service to criminal bands in the last few years.³⁴ So far, unfortunately, only tactical-level results have been achieved in security efforts directed against these groups.

President Santos, who served as minister of defense during Uribe's second administration, also acknowledged that the counterinsurgent focus of the DSP proved inadequate in facing the developing BACRIM threat. Thus, Santos has insisted since the beginning of his administration on the need for urgent reform of the justice system in order to deal with the chronic impunity that has plagued the country for years. He proposed a new strategy to target the BACRIM, regionally focused and including mechanisms to achieve more efficient coordination between the military, the police, and the justice system.³⁵

The Elimination of Drug Trafficking?

In 2003 Uribe proposed the "elimination of the drug business in Colombia" as the third strategic objective of the DSP.³⁶ This mission, linked to Plan Colombia, was clearly not fulfilled. The Uribe government acknowledged this fact indirectly by replacing this objective in the Democratic Security Consolidation Policy with a more realistic one in 2007: "to drastically raise the costs of drug trafficking-related activities in Colombia."³⁷

There have been significant gains in reducing coca cultivation, the production of cocaine, and the trafficking of precursors needed for its production. Nevertheless, aside from a few high-profile captures, efforts to tackle the armed actors involved in trafficking have produced disappointing results: the FARC, the BACRIM, and the National Liberation Army (ELN) have continued and deepened their involvement in the drug trade.

The supply-side battle in the drug war—based on the continuous eradication (manual and aerial) of coca fields, the large-scale destruction

of the infrastructure for drug production, and seizures of cocaine—has produced some success.³⁸ The total area of coca fields cultivated and the amount of cocaine processed has decreased markedly since 2008, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).³⁹ Colombia had 64,000 hectares of active coca fields in 2011, close to half of the area cultivated at the beginning of the decade.⁴⁰ Over the same period, the potential production of cocaine dropped by more than half—from 700 metric tons in the early 2000s to an estimated 345 metric tons in 2011.⁴¹

These figures mask a number of complications, however, ranging from the geographic and climatic conditions that make monitoring certain key areas of the country very difficult⁴² to the adjustments in methodology required to keep pace with changes in the cultivation strategies of coca growers.⁴³ In fact, the UNODC's measurements of illicit fields differ from those conducted by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), which are taken via satellite instead of aerial and on-the-ground surveillance, rely on different parameters, and have limitations of their own. For example, in 2011 the ONDCP reported 83,000 hectares of coca fields in Colombia—19,000 hectares more than the UNODC registered for that year.⁴⁴ The inconsistencies are even greater in the estimates of potential production of cocaine, and surprisingly UNODC figures in 2011 were greater than those of ONDCP: 345 metric tons vs. 195 metric tons, respectively.

This difference notwithstanding, it should be said that both sources report a decrease of approximately half in the area of cultivated coca fields and the potential production of cocaine in the last decade. This is without a doubt a considerable step forward. Particularly notable is the reduction of coca fields in the Meta-Guaviare region, which as we have indicated, was not only the principal site for cocaine production but also the FARC's strategic rearguard for years.⁴⁵

This decrease was driven particularly by the substantial reduction of coca fields in the department of Meta, which historically had the largest number of hectares of coca in the region. This change was due initially (2004-07) to military deployment in the area through Plan Patriota and increasing police activity, and later (2008-10), to the Integrated Consolidation Plan for La Macarena (PCIM). In the municipality of La Macarena, which used to have

close to half of the illicit fields in the department of Meta, a 77 percent decline in hectares of coca under cultivation was registered between 2007 and 2010; this result has been interpreted as a direct by-product of the PCIM.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this decrease may also have resulted from a large exodus of coca growers to other production areas within Colombia, due to military pressure in the area prior to the PCIM.

Even if this is true, the success of the PCIM can still be seen in its ability to make the eradication of illicit fields sustainable while creating the necessary conditions for the development of a licit economy through alternative livelihood programs. While there are no reliable recent studies on this to verify these claims, it is clear that coca cultivation has gone down in the zone during 2011, suggesting there has been an important result in the sustainability of the eradication of drug crops.

The bad news is that the majority of current illicit crop cultivation is still highly concentrated and located in the same areas identified in 2001;⁴⁷ the disturbing persistence of coca fields in the central region and the departments to the southeast is related to the activities of the BACRIM⁴⁸ as well as guerrillas still present in many of their traditional strongholds. Furthermore, since 2005 there has been a continuous growth of fields under production along the Pacific Coast, making it the largest coca-growing area, with approximately 40 percent of the total fields in the country in 2010–11.⁴⁹ This region is now a stronghold of the FARC and has a significant presence of BACRIM. Another region that has seen conspicuous growth has been the department of Putumayo, once ground zero for Plan Colombia, which, while seeing a fall in coca cultivation between 2008 and 2010 saw a doubling of drug crops in 2011. This is a department which once had a heavy paramilitary presence, but is now dominated by the FARC.

The Growth of State Presence and Territorial Control

An evaluation of the Democratic Security Policy in terms of its ultimate objective—achieving the rule of law throughout the country by enhancing democratic authority—is difficult and full of ambiguities. Three different aspects should be discussed in this respect.

Strengthening the Security Forces

It is undeniable that there has been significant progress in strengthening the capacity of the state's security forces, which led to the weakening and strategic defeat of insurgent groups as well as tactical advances against criminal bands. The modernization of the military and intelligence gathering—a process that was boosted by the DSP, although it began in the mid-1990s—must be highlighted.

Another achievement was the expansion of police presence to every municipality and major urban center. Although this initiative was presented by the Uribe administration as a success, it had at least two deficiencies. First, the growth of the police presence in rural areas was at the expense of a much needed increase in manpower in the cities, which contributed to the rise of urban crime and the sense of insecurity increasingly felt by city dwellers since 2009.

Second, the increase in police forces in rural areas was not supported by a coherent strategy coordinated with the military to successfully safeguard the countryside;⁵⁰ the police presence did not extend much beyond the heavily fortified police stations. The issue of responsibility for rural security remains unanswered, as the police and military share this role in an ad hoc fashion which differs from region to region.

The issue arises in the border regions, where the presence of armed groups has remained strong (and actually increased in the case of the guerrillas, pushed by the DSP from the center and the eastern areas of the country). In these regions the state presence is still tremendously weak; only in mid-2010 did the Ministry of Defense turn its attention to developing a strategy specifically to secure the border areas. The policy has yet to show any significant success.

Additionally, there is the problem of coordination between the police and the military, which has always been precarious due to rivalries and a lack of definition over respective roles and missions.⁵¹ This lack of coordination is critical for two reasons: 1) the overwhelming challenge posed by the BACRIM is in rural areas where the police, even if present, lack a proper strategy; and 2) the difficulty in defining roles and missions for the military

and police within the current strategic environment, in which insurgents and criminal bands share territory and increasingly work together in their pursuit of drug profits.

The DSP has improved coordination between the military and police, but this has been largely limited to operations focused on high value targets. The policy took the first strategic steps towards defining what kind of military support was required by the police in the fight against the BACRIM. Nevertheless, such initiatives did not manage to reach the operational and tactical levels and recriminations, with one side claiming the other was not fulfilling the required steps in the process, are still widespread.⁵² The government of President Santos is aware of this problem and in 2012 instituted new measures to prompt closer military-police cooperation, including joint patrolling in certain areas.

A final, critical issue is the overall legitimacy of the state security apparatus. The DSP emphasized from the start that legitimacy, understood as adherence to the constitution and laws as well as respect for human rights, was one of the principal factors that allowed a state to exercise authority over its population.⁵³ Regrettably, under President Uribe, the legitimacy of Colombia's state security apparatus was seriously called into doubt.

While the human rights record of the Colombian military has improved immensely since the 1980s and 1990s, the revelations during the Peace and Justice hearings that there had been long-time, systematic cooperation between elements of the military and the paramilitaries, with state involvement in murders and massacres, were very damaging. The evidence of ties between the military and the expansion of the AUC across Colombia throughout the 1990s is undeniable.

This systematic abuse of human rights did not end with the implementation of the DSP. There were several scandals that struck at the very core of state legitimacy and security force performance. These have damaged not only the credibility of the security forces, but the legitimacy of the state itself.

These scandals included the widespread wiretapping by the Department of Administrative Security (DAS), Colombia's civil intelligence agency at the time, of judges, politicians, and journalists opposed to Uribe. Under Santos,

the DAS was disbanded in 2011 and replaced by the National Intelligence Directorate (DNI); other scandals included the so-called “false positives” scandal in which civilians were murdered and presented as rebels killed in combat, in order to boost the appearance of government success and the continuing evidence of penetration by the BACRIM of elements of the security forces.

The investigation into the illegal wiretapping by the DAS has not concluded, although close aides to former president Uribe have been implicated. What is clear is that senior judges, politicians, and journalists—who had all been in opposition to Uribe or at least his ambitions for reelection to a third term—had their communications systematically intercepted. Several members of the DAS have already pleaded guilty and have been sentenced to jail time. Still under investigation is whether the president himself ordered the wiretaps. So far the highest political figure to be implicated is Bernardo Moreno, Uribe’s right-hand man in the presidential palace. The DAS answered only to the president; it thus seems unlikely that the intelligence agency would have engaged in such widespread illegal activity without presidential authorization.

The “false positives” scandal considerably damaged the standing of the army in the national and international arenas. The most high-profile case, involving the killing of young men from the poor Bogotá neighborhood of Soacha, revealed that soldiers recruited young men with the offer of jobs, then sent them across the country to be murdered and presented as rebels or paramilitaries killed in combat. Particularly alarming about the “false positives” was that they were not an isolated phenomenon.⁵⁴ Although figures vary significantly between government and independent estimates, the attorney general’s office reported by the end of 2012 that it was pursuing more than 2,200 cases of unlawful homicide by state agents, most of them carried out from the early 2000s through 2008. Some analysts have blamed this on the “body count” culture within some elements of the army, fostered by President Uribe’s constant pressure for results.

While cases of false positives have decreased significantly from 2009 to date, there is evidence that some links between security forces and the BACRIM continue, similar to links between the military and the BACRIM’s

paramilitary predecessors.

The Weakness of the Criminal Justice System

The enhancement of both military and police capabilities in Colombia was not met with a corresponding improvement in the country's criminal justice system. Nevertheless, the strengthening of the judiciary was included under the Democratic Security Policy, prioritizing the tightening of penalties as well as other critical measures to reduce impunity.⁵⁵

Impunity continues as a chronic problem in Colombia, notwithstanding a series of reforms over the last decade—including the 2008 formalization of a national shift to an oral, accusatorial system of justice and the budgetary efforts to put such reform into motion. Unfortunately, not only has the attempt to overhaul the system and to expedite the processes of justice shown little progress, but the estimated rate of impunity has not decreased and remains over 90 percent, even for homicides. Moreover, the reforms did not have an impact on the equally chronic problem of weak investigative capacity: the great majority of cases solved are minor felonies, and usually ones in which the perpetrators are apprehended *in flagrante*.⁵⁶

Another example of the system's limited capacity to deal effectively with complex crimes concerns the disheartening results of the Justice and Peace process. Despite significant national and international resources, more than six years of investigations resulted in the sentencing of only 14 paramilitary members out of 4,000 that applied to the Justice and Peace Law. In late 2011 the forecast was even bleaker: according to government calculations, at this pace it would take 95 years to deal with the more than 4,500 paramilitary and guerrilla⁵⁷ members being prosecuted under the Justice and Peace Law.

But not all the news is bad. First, amongst the sentenced paramilitaries are at least four high-ranking leaders, including Freddy Rendón (alias "El Alemán"), the head of the feared Bloque Elmer Cárdenas that operated in the departments of Chocó and Antioquia. He was finally convicted in December 2011. Second, a major reform to the Justice and Peace Law was

approved in late 2012, seeking to amend some of the elements that hindered its implementation. Mainly it adopted the principle of prioritizing cases involving massive violations committed by paramilitary leaders. In addition, the capacity of the attorney general's office to undertake investigations was improved, with the creation of specialized units for investigation and strategic analysis of the context in which massive human rights violations were committed.

Overall, improving the criminal justice system's capacity to deal with serious and organized crime remains one of the country's biggest challenges. To accomplish this goal, it is crucial to have a more strategic and coordinated relationship between the executive and judicial branches. How to achieve this is still an open question and one of the main concerns facing the current government in its fight against the BACRIM.

The State's Territorial Consolidation

Territorial consolidation is one of the dimensions of the DSP that is most difficult to evaluate: to begin with, the meaning and the reach of state presence throughout the national territory were never clearly defined. For this reason, the Santos administration initiated a complex, cross-sector review process of the national policy of territorial consolidation that was completed in late 2011.

Whatever the definition of territorial consolidation used, and considering the target areas selected by the government as priorities for consolidation intervention, it is clear that the state's actions imply a long-term process in which the sustainability of short-term results is critical. Some of the results of the Integrated Consolidation Plan for La Macarena (PCIM) seem promising in terms of creating conditions for the development of legal activities in the area. Recent studies on this experience, however, show that the sustainability in terms of irreversible outcomes and the possibilities of duplication in other areas of the country are still far from certain, particularly those in which there is a high concentration of criminal bands.⁵⁸ These doubts have increased due to serious political and administrative difficulties, which have hindered the implementation of the national policy of territorial consolidation from 2011 to date.⁵⁹

In sum, the process of consolidating the rule of law and state presence across the nation—the main aim of democratic security—is far from complete. The policy has no doubt laid the foundation for strengthening the security sector and for deactivating the majority of paramilitaries through negotiation; this, in turn, produced an initial decrease in violence. The DSP generated a transformation of the irregular armed groups—both guerrilla and paramilitary—and consequently, of the internal security paradigm. Within this new scenario, as the impact of the guerrillas decreased, a criminal threat of significant proportions grew stronger and more difficult to contain due to its atomized and diffused nature.

Colombia's current challenges are not insignificant. The central problem of sustainability in the Colombian context undoubtedly goes beyond military and police efforts. Sustainability involves a variety of government agencies, as the basic challenge of democratic state-building in areas where it has been precarious or nonexistent remains unchanged. In this context the main objective would be to regain peripheral territories from the control of irregular armed groups, bad governance, and illicit business interests, in order to create conditions for full democracy and licit development. This involves an enormous effort in terms of leadership and coordination across agencies, as well as a long-term national commitment.

Additionally, there is the need to redirect the DSP, which was essentially a counterinsurgent approach, in order to address the current internal security challenges. There is no doubt that a central focus on counterinsurgency was necessary a decade ago, when it was paramount to contain and push back the guerrillas. The current situation, however, presents a different, two-fold challenge: how to end the conflict with the guerrillas, combining decisive military efforts with peace negotiations, while also redoubling state efforts to contain criminal bands. In other words, in addition to strengthening and modernizing the security forces as part of the DSP, it is critical to define a coordinated strategy between police and military forces aimed at protecting rural areas where the BACRIM have their strongholds. It is also essential to solve the criminal justice system's chronic problems, starting with recognizing its central role in the struggle against organized crime.

Last but not least is the challenge of developing a long-term citizen security

policy that has crime prevention strategies at its core, paying serious attention to the problem of recruitment of youth and minors into the BACRIM and other irregular armed groups.

Colombia's Lessons for Mexico

Most studies of Colombia's lessons for Mexico have focused on questions of state capacity and security sector reform. We argue that Colombia does not have a template readily applicable to Mexico in terms of the state's fight against drug trafficking. However, Colombia does offer concrete lessons on how organized crime has responded to sustained pressure from national security forces and from the United States. Other relevant elements of the bi-national comparison are the militarization of the Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and their counterparts in Colombia's heavily armed illegal actors.

Whereas the war on drugs in Mexico began in earnest when President Felipe Calderón took up residence in Los Pinos in 2006, it began over two decades earlier in Colombia, after the assassination of the Colombian minister of justice, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, in 1984. The evolution of Colombian organized crime since that time can be broken down into four major phases, discussed below. A study of these different phases may provide lessons for Mexico and may allow law enforcement to anticipate the mutation of criminal organizations.

Phase One - First Generation Cartels

The 1980s saw the establishment of the first generation of Colombian drug cartels—that of Medellín under Pablo Escobar, then Cali under the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers. These organizations had a hand in every link of the drug chain, from coca cultivation to street distribution in the United States. There was no challenge to the authority of Escobar within the Medellín structure; he oversaw every aspect of his criminal empire. The Rodríguez Orejuela brothers did not engage in the same indiscriminate use of terror and violence as did Escobar, preferring bribery and persuasion. But

they, too, directed every aspect of the Cali cartel's operations.

Escobar declared war on the Colombian state over the issue of extradition—and won. His hand was behind a series of atrocities, including the assassination of three presidential candidates in the 1990 elections, the detonation of a bomb on a domestic airliner which killed over 100 passengers, and the placement of a huge car bomb outside the headquarters of the DAS, Colombia's intelligence and internal security police. Escobar's terror tactics led to the adoption of a ban on extradition in the 1991 Constitution that lasted until years after his death; new laws permitted the reinstatement of extradition in 1997. Notably, Escobar never intended to overthrow the Colombian government nor engage in any type of insurgency, criminal or otherwise. His goals were to continue the illicit drug trade and to block the use of extradition. In both respects, he succeeded.

Phase Two – “Cartelitos” (Baby Cartels) and Federations (1995-2006)

By 1995, the days of the vertically-integrated drug cartels were over. Pablo Escobar had been killed on a Medellín rooftop in 1993, while the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers were both arrested. The new face of Colombian organized crime was best illustrated by the Norte del Valle Cartel (NDVC) and the paramilitary army of the AUC, two groups with significant roots in the Cali and Medellín cartels, respectively.

The NDVC emerged as a drug-world power after the arrest of the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers and the subsequent fragmentation of the Cali cartel. The structure was one of partnership between different drug traffickers initially led by Orlando Henao, who had ties to Carlos Castaño of the AUC. After Henao's murder in prison in 1998, the different elements of the NDVC drifted apart and open war broke out between the factions of Wilber Varela (the founder of the Rastrojos BACRIM, still a powerful drug trafficking organization in Colombia today) and Diego Montoya (the leader of the military wing known as the “Machos,” now working with the Rastrojos' enemies, the Urabeños). Some elements of the NDVC worked with the paramilitaries, but others preferred to buy their coca base from the paramilitaries' rivals, the Marxist rebels.

The AUC was formed in 1997 (although the Castaños' ACCU—*Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá*—was first created in 1994). The AUC became home to drug traffickers from across the country, lending them a political façade as well as an exclusive network through which to make drug deals and pool shipments. In many parts of Colombia the AUC declared war on the rebels of the FARC and the ELN. While the motivation for this war was ostensibly ideological, it was in fact often driven by the demands of the drug trade. It is no coincidence that the most intense fighting between the AUC and the FARC was for control of the areas of coca production, among them the departments of Meta, Guaviare, Norte de Santander, and Antioquia.

It was also during this time, from the mid-1990s, that the FARC increased their involvement in the drug trade. Initially, they had charged taxes on the drug industry—on coca growers, on the buyers of coca, on those that had laboratories in their areas of influence, and on the cocaine-laden aircraft which took off from jungle air strips in their territory. During the war with the AUC for control of coca growing territory, however, the guerrillas began to establish a monopoly on coca cultivation and purchasing in their areas of control. Soon coca growers could sell only to the FARC; to sell to the FARC's paramilitary rivals was to risk swift and deadly retaliation. While the FARC continued to sell coca base to independent buyers, they soon realized that the margins were far higher if they sold cocaine, so they started their own crystallizing laboratories. The next step was to sell to international buyers, a process spearheaded by the 14th and 16th Fronts, in Caquetá and Vichada respectively. Then the final stage of their coca evolution was to start exporting cocaine themselves, using their control of frontier areas. This development was unwittingly aided by then-President Andrés Pastrana's peace process (1999-2002), where the 42,000 square kilometer safe haven granted by the government was used for negotiations with TCOs, among them Mexico's Tijuana cartel and Brazil's First Command of the Capital (PCC).

The tactical victories of beheading the Medellín and Cali Cartels thus led to new strategic challenges for law enforcement, as the monolithic organizations were replaced by "baby cartels," which often specialized in different links in the drug chain. Some concentrated on buying and stockpiling coca base; others in processing coca base into cocaine; some became transporters by land, sea, or air, while perhaps the real power

lay with those who handled the international connections and controlled smuggling routes. The difficulties of targeting these new organizations were multiplied by even more than their sheer numbers.

Phase Three - Democratization of Drug Trafficking (2006-11)

The demobilization of the AUC was declared completed by 2006 and in 2008 fourteen paramilitary commanders and top-level drug traffickers were extradited to the United States. As a result, the drug smuggling scene and the nature of transnational organized crime in Colombia changed once again.

The paramilitary demobilization heralded a new chapter in Colombia's transnational organized crime: the rise of the BACRIM. Keen on avoiding any rhetorical connection between these groups and the AUC, the state created the name BACRIM. The truth, nonetheless, is that almost all of the BACRIM have roots in the AUC, and much of their leadership was and is made up of former middle-ranking AUC commanders.

One real difference between the AUC and the BACRIM was the abandonment of any ideological façade. While one of the more powerful first-generation BACRIM, the Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia (ERPAC),⁶⁰ sought to maintain an anti-subversive image, this group was actually one of the pioneers in developing a region-wide agreement with the FARC. This involved the purchase of coca base from local rebel units, the right of access through guerrilla territory, and a non-aggression pact.

The March 2008 extradition of the paramilitary high command to face drug trafficking charges in the United States heralded the end of the AUC model. Among those sent north were some of the most powerful drug traffickers in the organization, including Diego Murillo (alias "Don Berna"), Ramiro "Cuco" Vanoy, Carlos Jiménez (alias "Macaco"), and Salvatore Mancuso. The importance of this moment cannot be underestimated. Henceforth the paths of the civil conflict and drug trafficking diverge. Up to this point, drug trafficking and the Colombian civil conflict had been intertwined. The forefathers of the paramilitaries came from the Medellín cartel, particularly

Escobar's right-hand man, José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha (alias "the Mexican.")⁶¹ In 1982 the Medellín cartel gave birth to the first paramilitary group, *Muerte a Secuestradores* (Death to Kidnappers, or MAS), followed in 1984 by the establishment of another self-defense force, the Association of Middle Magdalena Ranchers and Farmers (ACDEGAM). In 1988 Rodríguez Gacha hired Israeli mercenary Yair Klein to train right-wing paramilitaries in the Magdalena Medio region. Many of those trained by Klein went on to form the core of the AUC.

It was the Medellín cartel that initially encouraged the sowing of coca crops in Colombia and first developed agreements with the FARC rebels to protect drug infrastructure. When this agreement broke down, elements of the Medellín cartel began to target rebels and their supporters, a mission taken up by the paramilitaries of the AUC. The resulting war claimed the lives of thousands of members of the Patriotic Union (UP), the political arm of the FARC. For the FARC, the destruction of the Patriotic Union has served as a powerful disincentive to lay down their arms and engage in peaceful political competition. The fate of the UP casts a shadow over the ongoing peace talks in Cuba between the FARC and the government, contributing to the reluctance of the rebels to hand over their weapons.

Today the illegal actors in Colombia are no longer keen to fight one another. Since 2006, the BACRIM have developed agreements with the rebel groups; the prototype arrangement was forged between the Rastrojos⁶² and the ELN in the departments of Cauca and Nariño. Across Colombia, agreements between the BACRIMs and the rebel groups are becoming the norm, not the exception. These agreements differ from region to region, with the most primitive involving the selling of coca base and the payment of "taxes" for moving drug shipments through rebel areas. However, many of these relationships have moved toward alliances. Instead of just paying cash for the coca base, BACRIM groups may also pay in weapons, ammunition, and supplies. Thanks to their penetration of Colombia's security forces, the BACRIM also provide rebels with intelligence on military operations against them. In return, the FARC not only provide drugs but have also offered shelter to BACRIM leaders on the run and provided training to BACRIM units.⁶³

If one strips Colombian drug trafficking of its rival ideologies, then it begins

to look very much like the situation in Mexico: just business. The main conflict in Colombia from 2006 to date has been between two powerful BACRIM, the Rastrojos and Urabeños.⁶⁴ This is similar to the situation in Mexico, where groups such as the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas battle for territory. As in the Mexican situation, the rival BACRIM have their heartlands on opposite sides of the country and along different coastlines. The Rastrojos are based along the Pacific coast, supplying their Mexican counterparts—the Sinaloa cartel—along this seaboard. The Urabeños have established their powerbase along the Caribbean coast, supplying their east coast counterparts in Mexico, the Zetas. While this is an oversimplification, it nonetheless captures an important aspect of the dynamic.

Phase Four - Networks, Cooperation, and Hybrids (2011 to the present)

The current face of drug trafficking in Colombia is best described as a criminal-guerrilla hybrid, as the BACRIM work more and more closely with elements of the Marxist rebels, whose armies are fragmenting and in some areas looking more and more like criminal groups.⁶⁵ Some fronts of the ELN and the FARC have moved toward a strategic alliance with the BACRIM.

The Colombian government has applied the same strategy of beheading to the guerrillas as it did to the drug cartels. The result in both cases has been fragmentation. As the FARC senior and middle ranking command structure is decimated, a process of criminalization has begun in certain elements of the rebel movement. This process will only continue and worsen unless the FARC high command is given breathing space and the opportunity to reassert control over increasingly dispersed units. This is without doubt one of the reasons that FARC commander-in-chief Rodrigo Londoño, alias Timochenko, opened a peace process with the government. The FARC has traditionally used these periods of dialogue to reorganize, retrain, and refinance the movement. The FARC call for a bilateral ceasefire is also linked to this as the rebel ruling body, the seven-man Secretariat, needs to impose order over certain Fronts, rotate personnel, and get trusted commanders into key positions on the ground.

Increased criminalization is not restricted to the FARC. The smaller ELN, which historically maintained a distance from the drug trade on ideological

grounds, is now a major player in the cocaine trade in several parts of the country. The control exercised by the ELN Central Command (COCE) over its fronts has never been as strong as that of the FARC Secretariat. ELN units in Nariño, Cauca, and Norte de Santander are key players in the drug trade, and there is evidence of a nationwide agreement between this rebel group and the Rastrojos.⁶⁶

In Colombia, drug traffickers with roots in the first-generation drug cartels, the second-generation baby cartels, the AUC (those who demobilized, as well as those who did not), the Marxist rebels (the FARC, the ELN, and Popular Liberation Army [EPL]⁶⁷), the BACRIM, and common criminals now form an intertwined and interdependent criminal network. This network is no longer exclusively dedicated to drug trafficking, but is also involved in illegal gold mining, extortion, and other criminal activities.

As Jay Bergman, the DEA's Andean regional director, said: "Colombia's BACRIM are a cross-fertilization of the Norte del Valle cartel business model, with guerrilla and AUC expertise."⁶⁸

In the aftermath of the AUC demobilization, the Colombian police identified more than 30 BACRIM. Over time, these different groups have morphed into two principal networks, those of the Rastrojos and those of the Urabeños. There are of course other hugely important independent players, like Daniel "El Loco" Barrera, who controlled much of the drug trafficking from Colombia's Eastern Plains, using Venezuela as a transit country, until his capture in September 2012.⁶⁹

The BACRIM, unlike their cartel predecessors, do not operate as hierarchical, cohesive organizations. They are more than networks; they are also brands or franchises, such that local criminal groups will often affiliate themselves with one of the major networks, be it the Rastrojos or the Urabeños. These groups will carry out tasks for the core BACRIM—obtaining coca base, processing cocaine, or moving shipments, as well as using the franchise name to carry out their own criminal activities, like kidnapping and extortion.

Groups like the Urabeños and the Rastrojos—until the surrender of their leader Javier Calle Serna⁷⁰ and the capture of Diego Pérez Henao, alias "Diego Rastrojo"⁷¹—have had three distinct levels. The first is the core command, in the case of the Urabeños formed around a nucleus of former

EPL rebels who, after demobilization in 1991, joined the first paramilitary group of the Castaños, the ACCU. Leaders of the Urabeños, like Darío Antonio Usuga, alias “Otoniel,”⁷² and Roberto Vargas, alias “Gavilán,”⁷³ are former EPL guerrillas and they have brought their guerrilla experience into the structure and behavior of this BACRIM. There have been unconfirmed rumors that Usuga has a brother who is a commander in the FARC, something that would help to explain the good relations between the Urabeños and this guerrilla group in the northwest of the country.

The second tier of the BACRIM consists of the regional lieutenants, sent by the core command to take control of drug trafficking real estate: access to drug crops, safe areas for cocaine laboratories, internal movement corridors, and departure points for shipments abroad. Some of the regional lieutenants are former paramilitaries who remained in business after demobilization and have now affiliated themselves to a BACRIM franchise.

In setting up their criminal structures the regional lieutenants make alliances with local criminals, who provide the manpower for day-to-day operations, either on salary or contracted to do specific jobs. These local criminal groups form the third tier of the BACRIM. This third tier appears to work for the highest bidder, and in certain places Colombian security forces have been confounded by the sudden appearance of one BACRIM replacing another. In these cases, a third tier cell has simply changed sides and adopted a new name.

The interests of the top tier lie in the exportation of cocaine, and to a much lesser extent heroin and marijuana. They give orders to the second tier of the organization, the regional lieutenants, who buy the coca base, crystallize it into cocaine, and secure internal transit corridors and deliver the drugs to departure points. The regional lieutenants contract out part of this work to the third tier of the organization. The second and third tiers of the organizations have to be self-sustaining. They make their profits through extortion, using the power and intimidation that comes with the BACRIM name, and are often also involved in illegal gold mining, kidnapping, and local drug distribution.

All BACRIM have relationships with the guerrilla groups. The Rastrojos negotiated agreements with the ELN in at least five of Colombia’s 32 departments. In Cauca and Nariño, there have been instances of the ELN

engaging in joint actions with the Rastrojos against the security forces. Neither the Rastrojos nor the Urabeños want to fight the guerrillas for control of coca crops; as long as the rebels will supply them with coca base, the BACRIM are happy to cede control of these areas to the guerrillas. This cohabitation is inevitably leading to alliances as time passes and trust grows. As far as the Urabeños are concerned, agreements with the FARC have been traced in at least six departments.

With the capture or surrender of the Rastrojos high command in 2012, the Urabeños are now becoming the single most powerful criminal organization in Colombia. While the Rastrojos still dominate much of the Pacific coast, the Urabeños have challenged this in the crucial port of Buenaventura and even the city of Cali. It is likely that with time the Urabeños will become the last BACRIM standing, and this franchise will exercise dominance of the Colombian drug trade. While this may seem like a re-concentration of criminal power, the nature of the BACRIM is that of a criminal network, based around local criminal structures, called *oficinas de cobro*, the basic building block of Colombian organized crime. The Urabeños leadership does not exercise control over the structure. Indeed the top tier has little or no connection with the third tier which supplies much of the manpower. Instead, regional lieutenants are forming links with local *oficinas*, but in the form of pacts and agreements. In no way does the form of control approximate what the paramilitaries had over their ground troops, let alone the discipline of the guerrillas. Work gets subcontracted to local criminal groups that are part of the Urabeños franchise. With time the Urabeños central command will want to absorb criminal structures in strategic areas, to bring them more into the fold and put trusted people in charge, but Colombia's criminal landscape today does not lend itself to hierarchical structures and control as seen in the Medellín cartel and the AUC.

There has been a second shift in the dynamics of the drug trade over the last six years: a significant increase in domestic drug consumption. Before 2006, most of Colombia's criminal organizations concentrated on the exportation of cocaine. With the success of Plan Colombia and the DSP in demobilizing the AUC and dismantling much of the NDVC, however, there was an interruption in the flow of drugs out of Colombia, as many of the exporting organizations were put out of action or had their leadership incarcerated.

The country was awash in cocaine and the export routes and transnational criminal organizations still in operation were unable to handle the flow. This excess supply, combined with the emerging tendency of the BACRIM to pay their subcontractors in product rather than cash, led to a notable increase in domestic demand as local markets were flooded with drugs. There are few reliable government figures on the consumption of drugs in Colombia, but police chiefs in all the major cities and urban centers will agree that there has been a significant increase in the availability of drugs since 2006.⁷⁴ There have been two studies by the Dirección Nacional de Estupefacientes (National Narcotics Directorate), one in 1998 and another in 2008, which also point to significant increases in Colombian drug consumption.⁷⁵

This has not only established the domestic drug market in Colombia as a significant source of income for criminal organizations, but it has also led to a further “democratization” of the drug trade, as gangs previously dedicated solely to drug distribution have sought to make the leap to serious organized and transnational drug smuggling. This democratization reinforces the fragmented nature of Colombian organized crime. The *oficinas de cobro* in the major cities now no longer rely on the bigger groups, like the BACRIM, to survive.

The situation in the Colombian city of Medellín illustrates this change. From the founding of the Medellín drug cartel in the 1980s, money flowed from the top down, with Escobar and his lieutenants flooding the city with dollars and paying street gangs for services rendered. However, after the extradition of Escobar’s successor, Diego Murillo (alias “Don Berna”) in 2008, the model changed. The different factions of the Medellín underworld, grouped under the so-called “Oficina de Envigado,”⁷⁶ no longer had access to the money from exporting cocaine, and instead had to rely on their own criminal enterprises within the city based on extortion, lotteries, money laundering, car theft, assassination services, and so on. Many of these groups, which were until recently little more than heavily armed street gangs taking orders from the drug lords, have now made the leap into serious organized crime, looking to export cocaine on their own terms.⁷⁷ Police sources estimate the criminal earnings in Medellín to exceed \$20 million a month. So when the Urabeños seek to exert influence in Medellín they have to do so through persuasion and bribes. To win over certain “combos” (the term used in the

city for an *oficina de cobro*), the Urabeños have offered money, weapons, and drug routes. This does not mean, however, that the Medellín gangs are part of the organic Urabeños structure; rather, that they can be called upon to perform services for the BACRIM and protect the interests of the Urabeños.

Whereas under the first-generation cartels all links in the chain of drug trafficking were under a central command, and drug lords like Escobar controlled all facets of crime in their areas of influence, the situation today is one of total fragmentation. There are few grand capos in the business who are able to guarantee large-scale shipments and ensure that payments flow back along the chain. There has been a breakdown in trust between Colombian and Mexican criminal groups, perhaps largely because the relationships between major drug trafficking counterparts have been severed by death or capture. Now, Mexican buyers will insist on their representatives being present in Colombian drug labs where the cocaine is processed to ensure levels of purity and will even ride along in the drug submarines carrying their cocaine north. Instead of high-level drug lords, with their private armies and top politicians, policemen, and army officers on the payroll, there are mid-level brokers who assemble and pool big shipments, working alongside dozens of small organizations. Here, the franchises play their part, with networks replacing the all-powerful cartel boss.

Colombia's criminal networks have become infinitely more clandestine and harder to target. The top players know that once identified, their criminal life expectancy is short. Now, in contrast to the days of Pablo Escobar, few Colombians know the names of the major drug traffickers; and arrests lead to smaller interruptions in the drug trade as the networks quickly re-form around new brokers. It is also worth noting that these networks have greatly diversified their criminal portfolios, with illegal gold mining becoming an important source of income for BACRIM and guerrillas alike, particularly in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, Chocó, and Cauca.

Comparisons with Mexico

The first issue that arises when looking at the relationship between Mexico in Colombia is the idea that there is an insurgency in Mexico, something

which would make the situation look a great deal like Colombia pre-2008. In February 2011, the idea of insurgency was picked up by Undersecretary of the Army, Joseph Westphal. In September of that year, outspoken Republican Representative Connie Mack, then-chair of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, called for the United States to adopt a “counterinsurgency strategy” in Mexico, declaring that, “while Mexico doesn’t want to admit this, there is an insurgency taking place in Mexico along the U.S. border.”⁷⁸

One can argue the merits of using the word “insurgency” to describe what is going on in Mexico. We do not believe that there is an insurgency in Mexico, as by its very nature insurgency is linked to political rebellion. TCOs in Mexico want to operate with impunity under the current government and state system, not overthrow it. They prefer to corrupt key elements of the state apparatus to allow their criminal activities to go unhindered and do not seek to change the system itself. Unlike in Colombia, there have not been any major attempts to overtake, or even seriously challenge, the political status quo.

Rather than struggle with the definitions of insurgency, observers should recognize that the Mexican situation clearly does not compare with the Colombian insurgency, which has seen Marxist rebels fighting since the 1960s to overthrow the state and impose a socialist regime. While some analysts have sought to paint groups like the FARC and their smaller cousins, the ELN, as mere criminals, this is not yet the case. Exhaustive interviews of FARC and ELN fighters carried out by the authors show that ideology is an important element that holds these groups together, and that the money earned from criminal activities, like the drug trade and extortion, still goes in large part into funding the armed struggle, not for personal gain.

Fighters in the FARC and ELN do not receive a monthly wage. In Mexico, by contrast, there is not a single criminal organization that does not operate for profit, and no cartel worker would soldier on without handsome payment. Just because some TCOs in Mexico seek to win over the civilian population, this does not make them an insurgency. Since their earliest incarnations and in order to protect themselves and their activities, mafias have given local communities where they operated a vested interest in the criminal enterprise. It is also worth mentioning that, unlike Colombia’s AUC, FARC,

and ELN, not one Mexican group is on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

Another myth that must be dispelled is that Mexico's most wanted man, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera of the Sinaloa cartel, presides over his drug empire in the same way Pablo Escobar did with the Medellín cartel. While both men have been featured on *Forbes* magazine's list of richest men in the world, the criminal empires over which they reigned are very different, and the conditions under which they operated have few points of comparison.

Escobar was dedicated almost exclusively to the export of cocaine from Colombia to the United States. Guzmán runs a federation of different criminal organizations, which he does with a series of partners, some of whom, like Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, share equal status with him. Guzmán not only deals in cocaine, but also in heroin and methamphetamine, and his criminal portfolio is much broader than that of the Medellín cartel boss. He is involved in the export of drugs not only to the United States but also to Europe and Asia. Escobar was a pioneer, creating a peerless criminal syndicate in the 1980s. Only the Italian Mafia had comparable reach and wealth, yet the organization Escobar set up bore no resemblance to those with roots in Sicily or southern Italy. Guzmán, on the other hand, did not develop the Sinaloa cartel from scratch, nor does he directly control more than a fraction of its operations. Escobar directly challenged the Colombian state over the issue of extradition—and won. Guzmán has sought to avoid confrontation with the Mexican state, and even now, with Mexico's drug war in full swing, it is other groups like the Zetas that have a reputation for brutality, not his Sinaloa cartel. (Although when it comes to cartel-on-cartel violence, Guzmán has started more than his fair share of wars.)

Where, then, does the Colombian experience provide lessons and valid comparisons for Mexico? The first point of comparison lies in the fragmentation of drug trafficking organizations. Whereas in 2006, before Calderón launched his assault on cartels, there were five large drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, now there are at least 30 transnational criminal groups.⁷⁹ This fragmentation of organized crime, which mirrors Colombia in the 1990s, is continuing.

The most obvious and important example of this fragmentation is the once

mighty Gulf cartel under Osiel Cárdenas Guillén. After his extradition in 2007, the cartel fractured into two parts: the Gulf loyalists and the military wing, which broke away to form the Zetas. Now, the Zetas are one of the most powerful Mexican DTOs, at least in terms of territorial control.⁸⁰ The killing of Ignacio “Nacho” Coronel, a lieutenant in the Sinaloa cartel, in a shootout with police in July 2010, led to further atomization. His group split into rival factions, the most notable being the Jalisco cartel-New Generation, and the Resistance. Coronel’s death has contributed to a significant increase in violence in the states of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit.⁸¹

Fragmentation in general is responsible for the marked increase in violence over the last few years. Take, for example, the Mexican state of Michoacán: three different drug trafficking organizations are fighting for control (La Familia, the Knights Templar, and the Jalisco cartel-New Generation), among them generating record levels of violence.⁸²

The increasing militarization of Mexican TCOs also has Colombian precedents. Colombia’s paramilitaries relied heavily on the military for training and cooperation. They faced irregular armies in the form of the FARC and ELN. Domination of the drug trade in Colombia, until 2006, was linked in part to military capacity. The AUC became a fully militarized drug trafficking organization by the late 1990s, while the FARC were born principally as a military organization which later moved into drug trafficking.

The militarization of the Mexican drug trade is a relatively recent phenomenon which began in 1997 when 31 members of the Mexican Army’s elite Airborne Special Forces Group (*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales*, GAFES) were recruited by the Gulf cartel of Osiel Cárdenas Guillén. From then on, the Mexican TCOs began to militarize and use heavy weaponry and small unit military tactics against rivals.

When the Zetas broke off from the Gulf cartel after the extradition of Cárdenas, they created a quasi-military structure based around cells set up across Mexico and, more recently, in Central American nations like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, an expansion that had close parallels to the expansion of the AUC in Colombia. The recruitment of members of the Guatemalan special forces—the feared Kaibiles—gives this Zetas’ expansion a transnational flavor. Colombian TCOs have long had a presence

across the borders of neighboring countries, particularly Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama.

“We’re seeing a transition from the gangsterism of traditional hit-men to paramilitary terrorism with guerrilla tactics,” said Luis Astorga, an expert on drug trafficking at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).⁸³

Conclusion

Colombia and Mexico are now facing increasingly similar challenges in terms of their fight against drug trafficking and organized crime. With the ending of war between the Marxist rebels and Colombian drug trafficking organizations, the Colombian civil conflict is for the first time no longer intricately bound up with the drug trade. Colombia’s great successes have been against the Marxist rebels, more in the context of a counterinsurgent war than a war on drugs.

Colombia’s criminal underworld is now united in the interests of the drug trade. The Marxist rebels and the BACRIMs work together; even fighting between rival BACRIM is much reduced, at least for the moment, as the Urabeños establish hegemony. The structure of organized crime has evolved into networks. The removal of leaders does not ensure the dismantling of any organization, as the network reforms itself quickly, with little interruption to the flow of drugs.

Yet homicide rates in Colombia continue to fall, even as they rise in Mexico. The likelihood is that this trend in Colombia will continue, although it is dependent in part on the ongoing peace talks in Havana between the government and the FARC, and on whether the ELN secures a seat at the negotiating table. In contrast, as long as organized crime fragmentation and cartel fighting continues, the homicide figures in Mexico will continue to climb.

In Mexico, the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas continue their bloody struggle for supremacy. However, making war is not good for business, and the Colombian TCOs now realize that forging agreements and sharing routes is infinitely more profitable than fighting for them. Of course, there will be

internal power struggles within the Colombian underworld, but it seems that the widespread, quasi-military war for territorial control or national dominance is a thing of the past.

The fragmentation of Mexico's criminal underworld is already well underway. With time it seems likely that Mexico's drug economy will coalesce around franchises as well, perhaps those of the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas, just as occurred in Colombia with the Urabeños and the Rastrojos. There are still other players in Colombia, just as there will always be other players in Mexico apart from Sinaloa and the Zetas. The point stands, however, that hierarchical criminal organizations are becoming extinct, to be replaced by more fluid criminal networks.

Colombia and Mexico must study each other extremely carefully. On the strategic level, Colombia has proven the worth of extradition, made great strides in the eradication of drug crops, and has killed or captured top-level criminals, in the process dismantling some of the world's most powerful drug cartels. Today Colombia is looking more and more like Mexico in the war on drugs. Mexico has wrestled with the problem of domestic consumption of drugs and the war for control of the *plazas* (trafficking routes) far longer than Colombia. There is no "one size fits all" template for tackling organized crime in any country and all too often the lessons concern how *not* to do things. Colombia and Mexico have a long list of successes—and failures—on which to draw from each other.

Endnotes

- 1 "Clinton Says Mexico Drug Crime like an Insurgency," *BBC News*, September 9, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11234058>.
- 2 Robin Lustig, "Can Mexico and Afghanistan Learn Lessons from Colombia?" *BBC News*, October 7, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-11492357>.
- 3 Megan Gaffney, "Joseph Westphal's Comment on Mexican 'Insurgency' Suggests Hidden Depths to the War on Drugs," *The Faster Times*, February 10, 2011, <http://thefastertimes.com/news/2011/02/10/joseph-westphals-comment-on-mexican-insurgency-suggests-hidden-depths-to-the-war-on-drugs/>.
- 4 On these transformations, see Juan Carlos Garzón, "The Rebellion of Criminal Networks: Organized Crime in Latin America and the Dynamics of Change,"

Woodrow Wilson Center Update on the Americas, March 2012, <http://wilson-center.org/rebellion>; Bruce Bagley, "Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the Twenty-First Century," *Woodrow Wilson Center Update on the Americas*, August 2012, <http://wilsoncenter.org/publication/drug-trafficking-and-organized-crime-the-americas-major-trends-the-twenty-first-century>; and Juan Carlos Garzón and Eric L. Olson, eds., *La Diáspora Criminal: La difusión transnacional del Crimen Organizado y cómo contener su expansión*, Woodrow Wilson Center Latin American Program, 2013, <http://wilsoncenter.org/publication/CriminalDiaspora>.

- 5 In November 1998 approximately 1,500 FARC fighters took over, for 72 hours, the town of Mitú, the capital of the province of Vaupés, located in the Amazon region along the border with Brazil. It should be noted that Mitú is a small town of no more than 25,000 inhabitants, and its capture marked one of the greatest victories of the FARC in its almost 50 years of insurgent struggle.
- 6 This re-election was possible due to a complex and controversial process of reforming the political constitution of 1991, which had limited presidents to one term in office.
- 7 Ministerio de Defensa, Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional de Colombia, 2003): 12.
- 8 The sector's budget rose from an average of 3.5 percent of GDP during the Ernesto Samper administration (1994-98) to an average of 4 percent of GDP during Pastrana's tenure. In the first term of the Uribe administration this average rose to 4.4 percent of GDP and in the second to 4.7 percent of GDP. It should be noted that the increase in the average during Uribe's second term is mostly due to the sharp rise of the budget in 2008 and 2009 (4.8 percent and 5.1 percent of GDP, respectively). During the last year of the Uribe administration the sector's budget began a downward trend that continued through the first year of Santos's tenure, reaching 4.1 percent of GDP in 2011. Authors' calculations with data from the Ministerio de Defensa, Logros de la Política Integral de Seguridad y Defensa para la Prosperidad (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional de Colombia, June 2011): 81.
- 9 The greatest increase in the military's manpower occurred in the category of professional soldiers, which doubled from 22,000 in 2002 to 86,000 in 2010 (*Ibid.*, 79).
- 10 For an analysis of the process of enhancement and modernization of the military and its application to this campaign see: Román Ortiz and Nicolás Urrutia, "A Long Road to Victory: Developing Counter-Insurgency Strategy in Colombia," in James J.F. Forest, ed., *Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007): 310-33.
- 11 Policía Nacional, "Cobertura Policial del Territorio," *Revista Criminalidad* 2003 46:3 (2004): 9-14.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 15-16.

- 13 It is worth pointing out that this doctrine, alluding to the unification of efforts between military, police, and other civil agencies of the state, had been present from the outset, in the first security policy document of the Uribe administration (See Ministerio de Defensa, *Política de Defensa* (2003):15-17). That is why in 2004 the Center for the Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI, *Centro de Coordinación de Acción Integral*) was created within the Presidential Agency for Social Action, on the advice of the U.S. government, as an interagency coordination mechanism among 14 state institutions representing the government, security, justice, social, and agricultural sectors. Diego Molano and Juan P. Franco, “La Coordinación Interagencial: El Arma Secreta de la Seguridad Democrática,” *Revista Desafíos* 14 (2006). Interventions under such parameters were carried out with resources from Plan Colombia in nine focused regions which included 51 municipalities. There are no evaluations of these initiatives except for the one in the Sierra Nevada, on the north coast, considered the greatest success of the initial phase of the integral action campaign. Juan Carlos Palou and Gerson Arias, eds., *Balance de la Política Nacional de Consolidación Territorial*, Informe 14 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2011), available at www.ideaspaz.org.
- 14 Among the programs of integral action, the PCIM has been by far the most studied. See Peter DeShazo, Phillip McLean, and Johanna Mendelson, *Colombia's Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009); Gustavo Duncan and Alejandro Reyes, “Policy Paper: Plan de Consolidación de la Macarena,” (Document prepared for delivery to the Dutch Embassy in Colombia, 2009); Adam Isacson and Abigail Poe, “After Plan Colombia, Evaluating ‘Integrated Action,’ the Next Phase of U.S. Assistance,” (Center for International Policy, 2009), <http://justf.org/content/after-plan-colombia>; Daniel Mejía, María José Uribe, and Ana María Ibáñez, “Una evaluación del Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena (PCIM),” CEDE 13 (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2011), available at http://economia.uniandes.edu.co/investigaciones_y_publicaciones/CEDE/Publicaciones/documentos_cede; Juan Carlos Palou and Gerson Arias, *Balance de la Política Nacional* (2011).
- 15 A number of operations stand out: Operation *Fénix* (March 2008), in which Raúl Reyes (an alias)—a member of the FARC’s Secretariat whose campsite was inside Ecuadoran territory just over the border with Colombia—was killed; Operation *Jaque* (July 2008), in which Ingrid Betancourt along with three other U.S. contractors, seven army personnel, and four police officers were liberated; Operation *Camaleón* (June 2010), in which four law enforcement agents were freed; Operation *Sodoma* (September 2010), in which “Mono Jojoy,” a member of the FARC’s Secretariat and leader of the Eastern Bloc, was killed; and Operation *Odiseo* (November 2011) in which “Alfonso Cano,” the top leader of the FARC, was killed.
- 16 See Operation *Fénix* and Operation *Jaque* above, in footnote 15.
- 17 Soledad Granada, Jorge A. Restrepo, and Andrés R. Vargas, “El Agotamiento de la Política de Seguridad: Evolución y Transformaciones Recientes en el Conflicto Armado Colombiano,” in Jorge A. Restrepo and David Aponte, eds., *Guerra y*

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- 18 Jeremy McDermott, "Colombia's FARC rebels: End to kidnap and new start?" *BBC News*, February 22, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17177643>.
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- 28 The term "neo-paramilitary" was coined by analysts from the Resource Center for the Analysis of the Conflict (CERAC) and the Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris. See: Soledad Granada, Jorge A. Restrepo, and Alonso Tobón, "Neoparamilitarismo en Colombia: Una Herramienta Conceptual para la Interpretación de Dinámicas Recientes del Conflicto Armado Colombiano," in Jorge A. Restrepo, and David Aponte, eds., *Guerra y Violencias en Colombia. Herramientas e Interpretaciones* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2009): 467-99; Mauricio Romero and Angélica Arias, "Sobre Paramilitares, Neoparamilitares y Afines: Crecen sus Acciones ¿Qué Dice el Gobierno?" *Arcanos* 15 (2010): 35-45, available at www.nuevoarcoiris.org.co.
- 29 InSight Crime, "Urabeños call for Inclusion in Colombia Peace Talks," June 28, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-call-for-inclusion-colombia-peace-talks>
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- 31 Statistics are from the Monitoring Group of Illegal Armed Groups of the Direction of Rural Police, National Police of Colombia.
- 32 "Don Diego," the last leader of the Norte del Valle cartel, was captured in 2007 and extradited to the United States; one of the "Mejía Twins" was captured and extradited and the other was killed in 2008; "Don Mario," the leader of BACRIM active along the north coast was the "most wanted" man until he was captured in 2009; "Cuchillo," a renowned drug dealer, leader of the Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia (ERPAC), one of the most powerful BACRIM that emerged after the paramilitary demobilization, was killed in 2010; and "Giovanni," head of the Urabeños, was killed on January 1, 2012.

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- 35 This is the Multidimensional Strategy for Integrated War against the BACRIM, presented during the first National Security Council meeting convened during his administration (February 7, 2011), which focused on the BACRIM situation.
- 36 Ministerio de Defensa, *Política de Defensa y Seguridad Nacional*, (2003): 46-7.
- 37 Ministerio de Defensa, *Política de Consolidación de la Seguridad Democrática*, (2007): 39-41.
- 38 Statistics for the past decade regarding such actions conducted by law enforcement can be found on the Ministry of Defense website at <http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/>.
- 39 UNODC has been monitoring illicit fields in the country through the Integrated Monitoring System of Illicit Fields (SMCI, *Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos*) since 1999.
- 40 UNODC, “Colombia: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2011” (Bogotá, 2012).
- 41 Ibid.
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- 43 For example, an adjustment was introduced to the monitoring methodology in 2009 to include smaller fields, which have been increasing in number in the last few years as growers have attempted to avoid eradication. UNODC, “Colombia: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2010” (Bogotá, 2011): 17.
- 44 “Coca in the Andes,” ONDCP, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/targeting-cocaine-at-the-source>.
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- 47 “Colombia Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2011” (Bogotá, 2012): 15-16.
- 48 Mauricio Romero and Angélica Arias, “A Diez Años del Inicio del Plan Colombia: Los Herederos de las AUC, la Geografía del Narcotráfico y la Amenaza de Nuevos Carteles,” *Arcanos* 16 (2011): 19-20, available at www.nuevoarcoiris.org.co.
- 49 Authors’ calculations with data from “Colombia Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2011” (Bogotá, 2012): 21.
- 50 Historically, the police were focused on urban areas and did not develop a strategy for rural areas. As a consequence, even after the initiation of the DSP, they have had little capacity to provide adequate protection to the population in areas

under threat from irregular armed groups.

- 51 This has persisted even though the National Police has been under the Ministry of Defense since the 1950s, and is one of the reasons a unified command of the security forces is needed in order to confront the internal armed conflict.
- 52 This was evident in the fieldwork carried out by the FIP during 2010 in relation to a study on four key regions of the Consolidation Plan. See Juan Carlos Palou and Gerson Arias, *Balance de la Política Nacional* (2011): 64. The role of the military in the fight against the BACRIM was initially defined in the *Directiva del Comando General de las Fuerzas Militares* 216 of November 2009, which was later reformulated, due to impracticability, by the Santos administration as the Policy of the Ministry of Defense in the fight against Narco-Trafficking Criminal Bands (*Directiva del Ministerio de Defensa* 14, (May 2011)).
- 53 Ministerio de Defensa, *Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática* (2003): 18.
- 54 See Philip Alston, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions: Mission to Colombia," March 31, 2010.
- 55 Ministerio de Defensa, *Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática* (2003): 36-38.
- 56 Corporación Excelencia en la Justicia, "Overview of the First Five Years of Activity of the Adversarial Penal System in Colombia" (2011), available at www.cej.org.co.
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- 58 Daniel Mejía, María José Uribe, and Ana María Ibáñez, "Una evaluación del Plan de Consolidación Integral" (2011); Juan Carlos Palou and Gerson Arias, *Balance de la Política Nacional* (2011).
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- 61 See Verdad Abierta and José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, "El Mexicano," *Verdad Abierta*, September 20, 2011, http://verdadabierta.com/index.php?option=com_content&id=3557.
- 62 For more information see InSight Crime profile of the "Rastrojos," available at <http://www.insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/colombia/rastrojos>.
- 63 McDermott interview with intelligence sources in Bajo Cauca, Antioquia, November 2010.
- 64 For more information see InSight Crime profile of the Urabeños, available at <http://www.insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/colombia/urabenos>.

- 65 See InSight Crime Special Investigation: “The FARC, The Peace Process and the Potential Criminalization of the Rebels” at <http://www.insightcrime.org/special-series/peace-with-farc>.
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- 67 The Maoist-inspired EPL, founded in 1967, was demobilized in 1991, with some 2,000 guerrillas surrendering. A dissident faction continues to operate in Norte de Santander.
- 68 McDermott interview with Bergman, Bogotá, January 18, 2012.
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Mexico-Colombia: U.S. Assistance and the Fight against Organized Crime

RAÚL BENÍTEZ MANAUT

Editors' note: As this publication went to press, Mexico was again experiencing a major outbreak of violence in the western state of Michoacán. Self-described "self-defense" forces unleashed a major offensive in the state to regain control of territory held by a local criminal network known as the Knights Templar (KT). The KT are known for their involvement in the production and trafficking of meth-amphetamines for the U.S. market, and are also engaged in extortion of nearly all economic activity in the region known as Tierra Caliente (the Hot Lands). They levy informal "taxes" on agriculture exporters of avocados and limes as well as other local businesses, including very small enterprises. They also have corrupted and gained control of municipal governments, including police who have actively collaborated with and participated in criminal activity.

The state government's inability to respond effectively to the KT led to renewed federal intervention in the form of military and federal police deployments. But even federal involvement proved ineffective. Throughout 2013, reports began to surface of community groups arming themselves to retake control of their communities from the KT. Initially the federal response was wary but tolerant since there has been a long tradition of informal community policing in remote rural Mexico.

But developments in January 2014 suggested that the "self-defense" forces were more well-armed than previously believed, with military-style capacity to carry out operations. A relatively large force, possibly numbering as many as 500 militia members, carried out a major offensive against the KT in several towns and cities where the criminal group had established complete control. The ensuing

battles led to several deaths and raised a number of important questions for Mexico. Did the existence of such strong self-defense forces suggest the failure of the state to provide security for its citizens? Why had the federal government apparently permitted the militias to grow in numbers and strength? Would the militias disarm peacefully at the request of the federal government? And if they did, what strategy would the federal government employ to weaken the KT and ensure citizen safety in the Tierra Caliente?

Parallels to the Colombian experience have also been raised in this context. Are Mexico's self-defense militias comparable to Colombian paramilitary forces known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC in Spanish)?

In Benítez's view, as he told Colombia's Semana magazine on January 18, 2014, "the situations are totally different. In Mexico there is not and never has been, a group like the FARC. Additionally, the Colombian paramilitaries were financed, organized, and rooted in the interests of the country's ranchers and landholders; the Colombian state lost control of rural areas for a long time. Finally, the structure and composition of Mexican and Colombian criminal groups is different, rendering meaningless efforts to compare the two analytically or to develop solutions for the situation in Michoacán."

THE UNITED STATES AND THE DRUG TRAFFICKING WARS IN LATIN AMERICA

The traditional concepts of war (as between states and regular armies) in Latin America are not conducive to successfully fighting the new form of warfare like "wars against crime" that are generally transnational, low-intensity, asymmetric, and in which important segments of civil society are actively engaged. Latin American armed forces are principally charged with protecting national sovereignty, especially in Mexico, by protecting the homeland from foreign or domestic military threats and, thus, do not have doctrines, training, or an organization suitable for fighting organized crime.

The first efforts by the United States to construct a cooperative international system against drug trafficking took place under President Nixon in 1969, but

the first “war” against drug trafficking was launched during the government of Ronald Reagan (1981-89) and was waged in the Andean countries. Subsequently and throughout the 1990s, President Clinton launched Plan Colombia, an energetic campaign against illegal drug trafficking that was developed to reduce the power of the Colombian cartels engaged in cocaine trafficking. Given its significant economic, social, and political impact, cocaine trafficking undermined efforts already underway in the region to rebuild and strengthen weak states¹ and transformed U.S. counter-narcotics assistance to focus on battling the most profitable product in the world.

U.S. counter-narcotics policy is contradictory. On the one hand, nearly a quarter of the U.S. prison population is incarcerated for illegal drug-related offenses. On the other hand, states have begun to allow the consumption of medical and recreational marijuana. There is also a trend toward treating illegal drugs as a public health matter, with policies rooted in domestic prevention and education programs and improved police and intelligence measures. Internationally, however, the United States declared a “war on drugs,” initially in the Andean countries, with the Pentagon playing a fundamental role through military assistance programs designed to carry out the campaign for the region. Some analysts have argued that this “war on drugs” had an impact similar to the Cold War in its negative consequences on human rights and its emphasis on military force.² Similar consequences have been observed with the expansion of this policy to Colombia and Mexico.

At the beginning of the 21st century international dynamics changed within the illegal drug trafficking business and routes began to move to Mexico for two reasons: the Mexican state was transitioning towards democracy with a very rapid rotation of elites; and, after September 11, 2001, the United States focused primarily on the war on terror, leading to a reduction in the perceived “threat level” posed by drug trafficking. Even though George W. Bush’s government was aware that the criminal syndicates continued to be a threat, they became less of a priority, enabling the criminal groups to accumulate power, territory, and profits during this period. The fight against drug trafficking returned to the U.S. security agenda in late 2007 when President Bush once again signaled concern about transnational organized crime in Mexico, Central America, Colombia, and the Caribbean, and recommitted to confronting criminal organizations. The United States

did not, however, develop a strategy to fight organized crime until around July 2011.³

After 1990, the economic, political and social power of the drug traffickers grew. The traffickers, principally Mexicans, gained strength through armed confrontation and by taking advantage of the U.S. arms market. According to one study, "...lax gun laws in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona facilitate purchases of small arms and their trafficking across the [U.S.-Mexico] border. In addition, ... there are 5,500 federally licensed firearms dealers across the country, and more than 5,000 gun shows held annually in the United States where firearm sales, licenses, and reporting are not required."⁴

At first the traffickers armed themselves but did not use the weapons. They began to use them when the Mexican state declared war on them in 2006-07, and when competition grew among criminal organizations for control of drug shipments, ports of entry, highway transportation routes, urban warehouses, and finally, for the export of illegal drugs to the United States. These groups purchase cocaine in Colombia and sell it in the United States. Mexico is primarily a transshipment point because the direct route through the Caribbean has been largely closed off. In other words, the drug trafficking "war" initiated in the Andes in the 1980s emerged in Mexico around 2005-06.

A Rand Corporation report states:

Between 60 and 65 percent of all Latin American cocaine is trafficked to the United States, the bulk of which is smuggled via the Eastern Pacific/Central American corridor. The remainder is sent through the Caribbean island chain, with the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Haiti acting as the main transshipment hubs. In both cases, Mexico serves as the principal point of entry to mainland United States, with the country presently accounting for as much as 90 percent of all illicit imports to the United States.⁵

The important conceptual difference between Colombia and Mexico is that in order to receive assistance for its fight against drug traffickers, Colombia began using the word "narco-terrorism" in the early 1990s. Conversely, Mexico has tried to keep narcotics smugglers and terrorism separate. In

Mexico, the government as well as the vast majority of analysts have denied that “terrorism” exists in Mexico. However, after the attack on the Casino Royale on August 25, 2011, resulting in the death of over 50 unarmed civilians, President Felipe Calderón used the term:

This is an unpardonable crime that all of society must strongly condemn and reject. It is an act of terror and barbarism. (...) [These are] incendiary murderers and true terrorists on whom should fall not only the full weight of the law, but also the unanimous condemnation of society, public figures, political parties, social leaders, and the media.⁶

Nevertheless, analysts, academics, and politicians in Mexico have stated that greater caution must be used when characterizing violent acts as “terrorism.” For example, the Rector of the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM - Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), Dr. José Narro, argued in a public statement in 2011 that the term should be avoided.⁷ The captured perpetrators themselves stated, “We wanted to frighten. It got out of hand.”⁸ This demonstrates the attackers’ lack of political, ideological, or religious goals, which are central characteristics of a terrorist act. Earlier, similarly violent acts, such as the assassination of 72 foreign migrants (the majority from Central America) at Rancho San Fernando, Tamaulipas, on August 24, 2010, were described as criminal, not terrorist, acts even though they resulted in many civilian casualties.

“War” and State Capacity

Declaring war is a very dangerous proposition for governments because they run the risk of failing to obtain a quick and decisive victory. When Latin American governments declare war on poverty (and they have done so on multiple occasions, both domestically and in multilateral forums), they have rarely been successful. The same is true for the war on drug trafficking. President Álvaro Uribe’s popularity, regularly pegged at over 60 percent, helped sustain Plan Colombia and “successfully” improved national security.⁹

Plan Colombia was developed during Andrés Pastrana’s government (1998-2002) and was originally conceived as a six-year plan. Between 1999 and 2005, U.S. assistance for the program totaled \$4.5 billion. When Uribe took

office in 2002, he linked Plan Colombia to his “Democratic Security and Defense Policy” that identified five threats and five strategic objectives. President Uribe defined the threats as terrorism, the illegal drug business, criminal finances, trafficking of firearms, ammunition and explosives, and homicides. The policy’s strategic objectives included the consolidation of state territorial control, protection of the civilian population, elimination of the illegal drug business, maintaining the police and military’s dissuasive capacity, and achieving greater efficiency, transparency and accountability in public finances.¹⁰

Designed with Colombia and approved by the U.S. Congress as an anti-narcotics and anti-terrorism plan, Plan Colombia was in reality a strategy to fight the guerrillas of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*).¹¹ The guerrillas’ methods transformed them and other violent non-state actors in Colombia into terrorist groups while also forming part of the cocaine production chain. However, according to cocaine production, export, sale, and consumption statistics in U.S. and European markets, the Uribe - U.S. strategy only had partial success in reducing the hectares of coca leaf under cultivation or the number of cocaine production laboratories in the Colombian jungle.¹² Between 2001 and 2007, cocaine production in Colombia decreased by 24 percent, from 700 tons to 535,¹³ but the amount of cocaine exported to Mexican cartels remained roughly unchanged.

In order to bring cocaine to the U.S. market, a south to north “criminal corridor” was constructed between Colombia and the United States that includes: large migration flows of people fleeing poverty, often transported by criminal organizations with the capacity to traverse a fortified post 9/11 U.S. border, and large flows of cocaine (amounts reaching 300 tons) into the United States. At the same time, a number of illegal goods—including arms and large amounts of laundered money that fluctuate between 15 and 30 billion dollars¹⁴—have flowed from north to south along the same corridor. This criminal corridor created a “zone of insecurity” from Colombia to the southern United States and a “war zone” along Mexico’s northern border where the role of the armed forces is fundamentally important. For the United States, it is a war outside its own borders, and for the rest of the countries involved the war is waged internally by national armed forces called upon to compensate for the limited capacity of civilian security, intelligence,

and police forces to confront international criminal organizations.

In the case of Central America and Mexico, this “war” seriously threatens fragile democratic government institutions since it precipitates significant government corruption and renewed militarization.¹⁵ Beginning in 2008, the United States has defined these conflicts as “wars against crime,” implying they differ from anti-terrorism wars.¹⁶

The most important point of comparison between Colombia’s “war” and what is taking place in Mexico is that Colombia has used the war motif to describe its internal conflicts and violence since the 1950s, and the latest war on “narco-terrorism” is a continuation and mutation of its previous revolutionary and counterrevolutionary wars. These conflicts merged with the wars from the 1990s that involved the emergence of powerful paramilitary forces. In contrast, in Mexico there is a new “war” which is solely waged against drug trafficking. The use of the word “war” first appeared in 2007 with Calderón’s government; prior to that, “combating drug trafficking” was most commonly used.

George W. Bush’s government made an error in security policy when it conflated the fight against crime and the fight against terror. “Wars against crime” do not involve confrontations between enemies motivated by ideology such as those seeking to destroy Western civilization or the market economy. To the contrary, since international criminal groups exist within the structures of democracy and globalization, their objective is to accumulate economic and political power but not dismantle existing structures of government.

Given the power accumulated by the Colombian mafias in the 1990s (the Medellín and Cali cartels), and the Mexican cartels in the 21st century, the wars against crime and drugs in Latin America are among the most developed in the region. Indeed, the most powerful criminal organization in the world in 2010 was the Sinaloa cartel (or Cartel del Pacífico), headed by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, the Mexican equivalent of Pablo Escobar.

Critics of the war on drugs in Colombia maintain that the lesson from that country for Mexico would be to avoid repeating the process of atomization of the large Colombian cartels that resulted in the creation of approximately 600 small cartels, while the export of cocaine continued. As

Paul Gootenberg writes:

*"If any lesson exists for Mexico today, it is that the early 1990s war against Colombia's Medellín cartel did not really work. It mainly shifted cocaine's center of gravity from that besieged city to rivals in Cali, and many observers read the campaign as a tacit alliance between the Colombian state and Cali's low-key dealers against the riskier Escobar. As shown by criminologist Michael Kenney, U.S. intervention in Colombia in the 1990s ultimately led to more effective drug trafficking organizations. Colombia now hosts some 600 camouflaged export webs, so-called cellular 'boutique' *cartelitos* which have diversified with global sales strategies (to Brazil, Africa, and Europe), branched into complementary drugs, and gone high-tech with counter-intelligence and genetically-altered coca."¹⁷*

In this criminal corridor, the declaration of "war" in Colombia was not rejected by the population since the country has experienced constant "wars" since the 1950s. Thus, "war" and the focus of national security policy on the armed forces does not pose a political problem for Colombian presidents, nor is it a problem for Central American countries (which endured intense conflicts from 1979 to 1996). However, in Mexico's case, the last "war" was the revolution, which occurred 90 years ago (1910-20). Consequently, Calderón's assertion that there is a "war" against organized crime raised questions among multiple political and civic groups. Calderón stated: "Organized crime seeks territorial control; it will be a take-no-prisoners war since it is no longer possible to co-exist with the drug traffickers. There is no going back; it's us or them."¹⁸

Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative evolved in important ways by the end of the Uribe and Calderón governments. Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos took office in 2010 and announced two substantive changes to Plan Colombia and Uribe's policies. He signaled his support for a debate about the prevailing anti-drug paradigm, including the possibility of marijuana legalization; and, more importantly, indicated his willingness to engage the FARC in dialogue, thereby undermining a central element of Plan Colombia, combatting "narcoterrorism," by engaging in peace negotiations with an organization widely considered to be a terrorist group.

In the case of Mexico, President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December

2012 offering a strong critique of the Calderón policies that preceded him. Peña Nieto's criticism was that Calderón's policy of combating criminal organizations resulted in an overuse of military forces and a dramatic increase in violence. For his part, Peña Nieto sought a shift in the existing anti-drug rhetoric, indicating his desire to implement an "integrated" security policy based on prevention. He also signaled that Mexico's security relationship with the United States would be modified and centralized in the Interior Ministry. Additionally, the government avoided any mention of the Mérida Initiative within Mexico but committed to continue receiving aid from the United States to combat criminal organizations. The Peña Nieto government also denied the existence of a "war on drugs" and radically shifted its communication strategy, decreasing the information made available to the press on violence and drug trafficking.

One similarity between the Colombian and Mexican experiences has been each country's recourse to international assistance. In both cases the governments recognized that the state did not have the capacity to address the conflict on its own; yet recourse to the international community for assistance also implied state weakness, which in turn supported the argument that the cartels' increasing criminal activity is a byproduct of state "failure," a view based solely on state vulnerabilities and not its capacities. For example, General Barry McCaffrey made the following statement after his visit to Mexico in December 2008: "The Mexican state is engaged in an increasingly violent, internal struggle against heavily armed narco-criminal cartels that have intimidated the public, corrupted much of law enforcement, and created an environment of impunity to the law."¹⁹ Most of the written analyses in the United States by government officials, academics, and private consultants alike emphasize corruption as the cause of Mexican government paralysis, leading it along a path to failure (even if not already a "failed state"). For this reason, many U.S. analysts argue that Mexico needed U.S. assistance on a scale similar to that provided to Colombia.

In both Mexico and Colombia the concept of "failed state" has been used. Nevertheless, among the indicators defining a failed state and observed in Colombia or Mexico, the consulting firm *Stratfor* asserts:

... that Mexico was nearing the status of a failed state. A failed state is one in which the central government has lost control over

*significant areas of the country and the state is unable to function. In revisiting this issue, it seems to us that the Mexican government has lost control of the northern tier of Mexico to drug-smuggling organizations, which have significantly greater power in that region than government forces.*²⁰

This assessment of “failed state” mostly reflects interests of private firms that seek to exaggerate the existence of crisis conditions in a country in order to propose “reconstruction” assistance programs. Colombia lived through a similar situation about 15 years ago, a period in which the Medellín and Cali cartels exercised power throughout Colombia. While a grave situation, the Colombian state, in ways similar to the situation in Mexico, had not lost the capacity to run the country.²¹

Furthermore, the authoritarian course implemented by Uribe demonstrated the government’s ability to take actions to improve its capacity to run the country, even if these actions came at the cost of human rights violations. Moreover, neither government lost the capacity to run the economy and collect taxes or manage societal demands and organize political life, although in some Colombian cities and states such as in Cali and Medellín, and in some Mexican states such as Tamaulipas and Michoacán, the indicators of state failure were indeed notable.

But the question remains whether the use of the failed state concept by U.S. officials, firms consulting with the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, and some academics was sufficient to justify aid programs like Plan Colombia or the Mérida Initiative. In short, the answer is “no,” yet the dramatic increase in criminal activity in both countries meant that each government needed to request and/or accept international security assistance given that elevated criminal activity also posed a future risk to the viability of government institutions.

Mexico and Colombia: The Challenge of Comparison

To understand the extent to which the Colombian and Mexican situations are comparable it is necessary to briefly consider the events of the past 25 years. Starting in the mid-1980s, drug trafficking began to occupy an

important place in Mexico's security priorities. However, not until the 21st century did the Mexican government determine that it must take a decisive stance in the fight against criminal networks because of the political impact organized crime was having in Mexico.²² Organized crime negatively affected Mexico's democratization process – begun in the second half of the 1980s – because of its ability to co-opt government and politics through its “financing” of government officials.

Furthermore, Mexican drug traffickers and leaders of organized crime became very powerful as a result of the war on drugs in Colombia and the Andes in general. In effect, the successful dismantling of Colombia's powerful mafias by the United States and Colombia had a negative impact on Mexico, an impact exacerbated by firearms trafficking from the United States, resulting in a major increase in violence.

In Colombia, the democratization that resulted from the 1991 Constitution enacted under President César Gaviria resulted in a reformulation of security policy through the creation of the “Presidential Council for Defense and Security.”²³ For the first time, “demilitarization” of security policy and inter-agency coordination appeared on the agenda. Additionally, with the new constitution a civilian defense ministry was created to coordinate military and police forces and, most significantly, reform of the National Police occurred by gradually extending to the police authority over the government's response to drug trafficking.²⁴ These are the two most important positive lessons Mexico can take from the Colombian case: reform of the national defense structure to include a civilian defense ministry and a professionalized national police force. The principal mistaken assumption about Colombia is that violence declined because of anti-drug policies when in reality it decreased because of the effective deployment of all of the U.S. aid in fighting the FARC and because of the demobilization of the paramilitary groups.²⁵ In Mexico, neither guerrilla nor paramilitary forces exist as variables generating violence.

U.S. and Colombian authorities assert that the successful rebuilding of the country's institutional capacity has been a critical element of the strategy's success and that Colombia has transitioned from being an aid importer to an exporter of its successful experience in fighting organized crime:

“After years of intensive capacity building assistance in Colombia,

*the United States is working to transfer financial and operational responsibility for institutional development to the Government of Colombia. Colombia now is an exporter of law enforcement and justice sector capabilities, providing assistance and advice for police, prosecutors, protection programs, and judiciary, criminal law, and procedure development. This reality is the result of the success of U.S. assistance in Colombian capacity building, a success the United States aims to replicate with other partner states.*²⁶

In this sense, the Mérida Initiative in Mexico has a similar objective: to strengthen the state.²⁷

The primary difference between Colombia and Mexico is over the type of “war” each has confronted. See Table 1 below.

Type of War	Colombia	Mexico
1. War against insurgency	Yes	No
2. War against paramilitaries	Yes	No
3. War against criminal organizations (The state against cartels)	Yes	Yes
4. War between drug trafficking groups	Yes	Yes
5. War within the state (The state and healthy institutions against the corrupt ones)	Yes	Yes

In Colombia, the strategy to fight war Type 1 has succeeded through military and police action and the use of intelligence; war Type 2 via negotiation, and war Type 3 only partially since the cartels have fractured but cocaine production continues, which explains the reduction in violence. War #4 has decreased in intensity, but remains an issue among smaller cartels. The fifth kind of war has been important to the institutional rebuilding and professionalization of the police, the justice system, and the modernization of the armed forces. Colombia’s struggle and experience in this last area can be instructive to Mexico.

The Colombian experience has been used in Mexico by different analysts

to support the idea that deploying the armed forces must be the principal instrument for containing drug-trafficking. At the same time, analysts acknowledge that the Mexican state has greater capacity than its Colombian counterpart for addressing the problem of drug trafficking because its state capacities have historically been stronger than Colombia's.²⁸

The Military and the Police

Another important difference between the two countries is that Colombian drug-trafficking activity is centered in rural zones where coca crops and processing laboratories are located, while in Mexico it is an urban activity based on maintaining safe houses for warehousing imported cocaine for eventual export to U.S. border cities and farther north. Additionally, fighting drug trafficking in Mexico begins with the interdiction of airplanes, boats, and land cargo arriving from Colombia, Venezuela, and Central America. Mexico has insufficient technological and human resources to make this effective. As a result, the drug cartels use extensive corruption networks to also control ports, borders, clandestine airports, and the highways that lead north. The Mérida Initiative has a significant aid component for modernizing equipment to improve interdiction. Thus, in Colombia, there are only two criminal activities associated with cocaine, production and export, while in Mexico criminal operations are more complex including importation, establishing a network of warehouses to transfer the cocaine to the border, and then exporting it.

Accordingly, military tactics for combating Colombian drug trafficking are similar to counterinsurgency actions, such as identifying encampments and laboratories and destroying crops. In Mexico, while the fight against marijuana and poppy cultivation requires military tactics similar to those used in Colombia, cocaine trafficking remains the principal drug-related activity. Colombia has supported its armed forces through Plan Colombia with the delivery of Blackhawk helicopters from the United States; between the government's own purchases and U.S. assistance, they have more than 80 helicopters. In contrast, the Mexican armed forces only have 12. Whereas the Colombian military budget is the largest in Latin America as a percentage of GDP and of the nation's budget (8.16 percent), Mexico has one of the smallest budgets of the region: 0.49 percent of GDP, and

2.65 percent of the national budget. Furthermore, in 2010 the Colombian military had 268,242 members, while the Mexican military had a total of 258,439. Given that Colombia's 2010 population was 45,659,000 compared to Mexico's 107,431,000, the size of the military force in Colombia per capita is 2.3 times that of Mexico.²⁹ Thus, if some aspects of the anti-trafficking war in Colombia are considered successful, it is partly because the state is highly militarized, while the Mexican state, contrary to what is often asserted, is a demilitarized state (at least in terms of force size, budget, and equipment).

Another notable difference between Colombia and Mexico is that in the former, human rights violations – although this was not recognized as part of the strategy – resulted from the operations of the armed forces. This led to the “false positives” crisis in 2008 that the army later acknowledged as an “erroneous” tactic.³⁰ In the Mexican anti-trafficking war, human rights violations have not been acknowledged by the military in their operations and the responsible parties have not been held accountable except when a “media scandal” arises. In the Mexican government's lexicon this problem has been identified as “collateral damage” and there are no data on the number of innocent civilian victims from this war, whether they were caught in the crossfire between warring gangs, between gangs and government forces, or simply “disappeared.”

Another key point of comparison is their respective police structures and the fight against common crime. In Colombia many analysts have praised the performance of the National Police, which led to a reduction in levels of crime, especially in big cities like Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. The apparent success of the public security strategy led to greater public support for the government's overall security strategy. In Mexico, police reform was implemented while crime and homicides were on the rise and created fear in the general population, which led to the strategies' rejection by the majority of elites.

Bolstering Mexico's Federal Police was a slow process and has continued on in new ways in the Peña Nieto government. In Colombia there are 157,000 police officers, of which 70,000 belong to the National Police, while in Mexico there are 450,000 municipal, state and federal police, of which only

36,000 are Federal Police. The current government proposes adding 5,000 new police with the formation of a gendarmerie force integrated into the civilian force, but this is still an aspiration and not yet a reality.

The police agencies with the capacity to confront organized crime are the National Police in Colombia and the Federal Police in Mexico. Clearly, the Colombian National Police force is superior to Mexico's because the process of force professionalization began in Colombia in the early 1990s while in Mexico, the Federal Police was created in 1999 with a much reduced force, and professionalization did not begin in earnest until 2007. For this reason, those who are critical of Mexico's strategy of using its armed forces and call for their removal from fighting organized crime propose an untenable solution because of the police force's weakness and the absence of an alternative security agency that could replace the military.³¹

A second point of comparison is how each country has dealt with the violence associated with drug trafficking. In Mexico, Calderón's government argued that increases in violence and homicides were primarily the result of conflicts between the cartels, not between the cartels and the government, and that this would lead to the cartels' "self-destruction." The problem with this argument is that not only are the criminal organizations not self-destroying, they are growing and expanding their territory. Furthermore, the victims of the violence are not only criminals, but include innocent civilians whose numbers are increasing on a daily basis.³² In contrast, Colombia did manage a notable reduction in homicides as a result of governmental action, which is why the strategy had a positive impact on Uribe's popularity. On this issue General Óscar Naranjo, the former chief of the Colombian National Police, has remarked, "When drug trafficking has heavily penetrated society, the main problem is not violence, but the lack of violence," because that implies that the drug-traffickers control society.³³

Thus, in Mexico, the "peace" prior to the 2007 spike in violence would suggest the existence of a "*pax narco*," and Calderón's strategy, following Uribe's, would be to break this pax and take back control of the state. Similarly, comparing Colombia and Guatemala to Mexico in order to justify strengthening the armed forces, former Salvadoran guerrilla Joaquín

Villalobos stated,

“To regain security Colombia multiplied the armed forces. In contrast, Guatemala is falling into the hands of organized crime because it cannot build up its forces (...) The Colombian and Guatemalan cases are very clear, in the former the conflict was exacerbated, in the latter the state has been practically defeated.”³⁴

Mexico is now entering a new phase with a new government headed by President Enrique Peña Nieto since December 2012. While his security strategy is still taking shape, it is noteworthy that he named Colombian General Óscar Naranjo as one of his principal advisors for devising a new security strategy. Interestingly, General Naranjo stated in a published interview that one of the main “errors” of the Calderón government was to call its security policy a “war.”³⁵ This suggests that the new Mexican government may be willing to re-think the Calderón strategy but precisely what this new strategy will mean is only slowly becoming clear. For example, the Peña Nieto government has spoken of the need to prioritize crime prevention and the reduction of violence. It has also discussed the formation of specialized police units, including a *gendarmerie*. But these initiatives have yet to be spelled out clearly and in detail. Peña Nieto’s government and security advisors have centralized decision-making but in practice, they continue to rely on the armed forces as the primary operational force to combat the cartels and the monthly homicide rate of 1,000 is unchanged.

Conclusions

To summarize, the principal similarities between Mexico and Colombia include:

- The growth in drug cartels resulting from the export of the same illegal product—cocaine—and the use of the same criminal networks. Colombian cartels were compelled to use Mexican transshipment routes because the Caribbean corridor was shut down. This changed the hierarchy among the cartels: at first the Colombians controlled the business but towards the end of the 1990s, Mexican criminal

organizations took over as they increasingly controlled the introduction of illegal products into the U.S. market.³⁶

- In both countries drug cartels capture elements of the state through corruption in order to facilitate the cocaine trade. Drug traffickers seek the protection and complicity of state security agencies (police and military forces, intelligence officials, and the judiciary) to facilitate their business.
- The use of the armed forces has been prioritized as the first line of containment because of the fragility of the state and local police forces. Nevertheless, U.S. efforts have included building up national police forces (in Colombia in 1990 and in Mexico in 1999).
- The intelligence services of both countries were transformed from their past role of principally conducting “political” intelligence to being modernized and updated analysts of security risks with a focus on developing intelligence about criminal organizations. Similarly, U.S. assistance programs include important components that promote “intelligence exchanges.” With changes in government in Colombia and Mexico, intelligence cooperation continues to be strategically important.
- Both Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative include significant programs for justice system modernization and professionalization. In Mexico, U.S. support for justice reform is essential for the government of Peña Nieto.³⁷
- Both countries have had popular presidents who enjoyed approval ratings of over 50 percent in public opinion surveys.
- Significant “collateral” damage has affected the innocent civilian population, and has included many accusations of human rights violations by the armed forces. In Colombia the most serious issue is the massive forced displacement of civilian populations; and in the specific case of military command responsibility, the appearance of “false positives.”³⁸ In Mexico, reports of impunity and human rights abuses by the armed forces have increased.³⁹

The principal differences are the following:

- Both the Colombian and U.S. governments defined criminal activity in Colombia as a synthesis of drug trafficking and terrorism—“narco-terrorism”—leading to assistance programs rooted in “anti-terrorism” strategies. This is changing in Colombia as a result of the negotiations with the FARC in 2013. In Mexico, prior to the attack on the Casino Royale on August 12, 2011, authorities had not linked the cartels’ criminal activity to terrorism, nor had they defined their policy as “anti-terrorist.” The drug cartels are viewed simply as “organized crime” and the corresponding laws are used to fight them.
- As a producer country, Colombia’s problem is basically rural, rooted in the countryside. In Mexico it is an urban phenomenon (where cocaine is warehoused), with transportation routes (the entry routes to Mexico along the southern border of Central America, and the sea and airports) moving northward to the large cities on the northern border of Mexico (Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros) for export to the United States.
- In Colombia, various fronts of the armed revolutionary group FARC joined criminal forces, allowing the fight against the latter to be defined as a “war on terrorism.” In Mexico there are no armed movements linked to drug trafficking, and the small armed leftist groups (such as the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* [EZLN], and the *Ejército Popular Revolucionario* [EPR]) emphatically reject these criminal activities so as to avoid being labeled “enemies” by the United States and becoming a part of U.S. security strategy.
- In Colombia there is no anti-U.S. “military nationalism” as exists in Mexico. This means cooperation between the United States and Mexico must be done carefully so as to avoid inducing an “implicit rejection,” or “mutual distrust.” This could impede increased levels of assistance from the United States, especially if it is accompanied by unilateral policies like Operation “Fast and Furious,” which resulted in firearms entering Mexico in an effort to pursue firearms traffickers, but without informing Mexican authorities. This operation, considered a failure, resulted in many assault weapons entering Mexico illegally and falling

into the hands of criminal organizations. In Colombia, the strategy's implementation led to a statistically verified reduction in the national homicide rate due, in part, to the dismantling of the paramilitary groups. In contrast, in Mexico, violence increased as a by-product of Felipe Calderón's security strategy, with homicide rates increasing due to conflicts between criminal groups and the use of a "war" strategy to confront organized crime. Homicides connected to organized crime are estimated to have increased to more than 60,000 between December 2006 and December 2012, leading to strong criticism from important sectors of the country who demand the armed forces return to the barracks.

- Part of Colombia's success was due to a decisive political commitment to eliminate corruption. This was demonstrated by the imprisonment of judges, politicians, parliamentarians, governors, police, and even members of the intelligence services and security forces.⁴⁰ In contrast, political will in Mexico is emphasized in presidential discourse but in reality the fight against corruption associated with drug trafficking has not materialized; indeed, there are no business people or important political officials in prison. Therefore, the Mexican strategy is partial; limited to combating violence without incorporating the "narco-political" or money laundering segments of the problem.
- Homicide rates have decreased in Colombia and, as a result, the public sees improvements in safety on the streets and supports the government's strategy. The homicide rate declined from 70 per 100,000 residents in 2002 to 32 in 2011.⁴¹ In Mexico, homicide rates increased from 10 to 25 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2006 and 2012.⁴²
- Despite a concerted effort by the Peña Nieto government to articulate a different security strategy, security cooperation with the United States will undoubtedly continue being enormously important even though any reference to the Mérida Initiative has been dropped from official statements.⁴³

In sum, the primary positive lesson from the Colombia experience is the success of institutional rebuilding within the security sector; and the most significant negative factor is the lack of respect for human rights and the

impunity among the military and police responsible for battling the cartels. This is the greatest vulnerability of both the Colombian and Mexican strategies, given the impact on innocent civilians in declaring this so-called “war” on drug trafficking by the United States and Mexico and the “war on narco-terrorism” in Colombia.

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- 41 María Victoria Llorente and Sergio Guarín León, "Colombia: Éxitos y leyendas de los 'modelos' de seguridad ciudadana: los casos de Bogotá y Medellín", in Carlos Basombrio, ed., *¿A dónde vamos? Análisis de políticas públicas de seguridad ciudadana en América Latina* (Woodrow Wilson Center and CASEDE: México, 2013): 178.
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Drug Trafficking: A National Security Threat

MARTA LUCÍA RAMÍREZ DE RINCÓN

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND MEXICO

The situation in Mexico today is similar in many respects to the Colombia of the 1990s, when the country had been victim of so many years of violence and organized crime. However, the roots, actors, processes, and manifestations of the problem in Mexico differ from Colombia's in important ways. Unlike in Mexico, in Colombia organized criminality from the outset had a political discourse and communist ideology which was aimed, with the support of the Cuban regime, at defeating the existing political order and system.

At a time when countries across Latin America suffered military coups, Colombian society, perhaps as a result, made a tacit decision to limit the size and capabilities of its armed forces and keep them under control, in order to avoid the kind of rupture of the democratic process others in the region had experienced. But if it is true that Colombia did not have military coups, it is also the case that the policy of keeping the military small and weak was enormously costly: the government was unable to prevent the growth of guerrilla groups and the irreparable damage that the 50-year-long conflict has inflicted on Colombian society and the country's development.

Having a strong and sizable army did not have to signify the imminent risk of a coup, as some feared. Colombia's institutions, although affected by the political violence in the country, were strong; and Colombia's political class, led at the time by President Alberto Lleras Camargo (1945-46 and 1958-62), was exercising international leadership, as evidenced by the proposal to establish the Organization of American States (OAS).

The precarious situation of Colombia's armed forces impeded them from making headway against the illegal armed groups. With the passage of time and the rise of narco-trafficking in the 1980s, armed organizations faced little resistance as they began to mutate toward activities ever more geared to the production and trafficking of drugs and associated forms of cruel criminality.

As requested by the Wilson Center, this essay provides commentary on the papers by Raúl Benítez Manaut and María Victoria Llorente and Jeremy McDermott; it does not necessarily present an alternative or third point of view. That said, the essay provides a brief overview of the organization of drug trafficking and its destructive power in Colombia, precisely to explain the circumstances in August 2002 in which we began to draft the *Política de Seguridad Democrática* (Democratic Security Policy, DSP).

Why We Considered Drug Trafficking as a Threat to National Security

The initiative to document the process, objectives, and results of the DSP and to define its medium and long-term strategic goals arose from the conviction that security could only be achieved through a comprehensive vision and strategy that involved not only the armed forces and police but also other cabinet ministries and state institutions. We believed that the comprehensiveness and efficacy of the strategy would create the necessary space for a political, negotiated end to the Colombian conflict. Based on the guidelines laid out in presidential speeches and the instructions given by the chief of state at daily security council meetings, my adviser at the time in the Ministry of Defense, Sergio Jaramillo, with the support of his team, was charged with drafting a document that would bring together the conclusions of a strategic planning exercise involving the armed forces, the police, and civilian staff at the Ministry. Through this exercise we

characterized drug trafficking—together with the guerrillas, paramilitarism, kidnapping, and terrorism—as threats to national security and to Colombia’s democratic regime. We also defined as lesser threats to citizens (but not to the democratic system) issues such as climate change, the dissatisfaction of indigenous groups, poverty, and food security—issues now at the top the international agenda.

This examination of security threats included discussions with military commanders and experts about the concept of national security and its traditional focus on external threats rather than on the various manifestations of domestic criminality that affected citizen security. In the end, the view that prevailed was that the magnitude of the negative impact of drug trafficking and its continual penetration of different levels of society threatened the quality of Colombian democracy. (Colombia was the only country in Latin America that never had a military coup at some point during the 20th century.) The prevailing view also held that the scope of drug trafficking could also lead to Colombia’s isolation by the international community, which would increase the likelihood that armed guerrilla groups, by then clearly linked to drug trafficking, would at some point achieve their objective of taking power.

The DSP as originally conceived was thus based on speeches and directives by President Álvaro Uribe; our own analysis, judgment, and initiatives; the research of and discussions with the ministry’s adviser as well as with adviser Alfredo Rangel and Vice Ministers Andrés Soto and Andrés Peñate; the constant work with military and police commanders; and the comments and recommendations of business leaders and academics whom I invited to analyze the preliminary draft. These inputs led to the design of the DSP as a policy of the state to be carried out over a period of ten years.

Unfortunately, certain elements of the DSP were never implemented. Changes in the personnel of the ministry after we left in 2003 led to different policy priorities and criteria. As a result, some analysts have argued that the DSP was opposed to a political solution to the armed conflict. To the contrary, the text we drafted indicates clearly that military action had to be complemented by judicial reform that would guarantee the superiority of the state over actors in the conflict and over terrorism. The efforts of the state were aimed at achieving a political solution once the armed

organizations' will to fight had been broken, along with their goal of taking power.

The papers by Llorente and McDermott and Benítez recount some of the most salient aspects of the government's policy. The second half of the paper by Llorente and McDermott offers an interesting description and analysis of the current organization of drug trafficking in Colombia and the transition from large cartels to medium-sized and smaller organizations which remain powerful and even harder to detect. However, the paper offers little by way of analysis to help identify those institutional elements—including the coordination between society and government institutions—that might offer Mexico some guidance as to what has worked and what has not in Colombia's difficult experience. Their paper also fails to identify errors that should be avoided based on Colombia's mistakes throughout almost 40 years of fighting drug trafficking and 50 years of fighting guerrilla groups. Indeed, the first part of their paper fails to offer useful guidance on how Mexico might confront the magnitude of its security challenge. Rather, the paper focuses heavily on a political—and in my opinion highly biased—account that seems more concerned with providing recognition to one of Uribe's ministers and assigning blame to the president than with identifying lessons that could have helped Colombia achieve better results or that could be applied to Mexico.

When drug trafficking organizations began to grow and feel ever more powerful, they began their penetration of Colombian society, first via infiltration of the political class and later through threats, extortion, and the blatant corruption of officials in various state institutions, including the "armed forces, the police, Congress, the judiciary, mayoral offices and governorships, among others."¹ Their corrupting power was such that, through direct involvement in politics, they gained the support of one of Colombia's traditional parties. Infamous drug lords such as Carlos Lehder and Pablo Escobar were elected to Congress and established political movements under their control, all the while continuing to run sophisticated criminal organizations engaged in drug trafficking, terrorism, and violence. Criminal activities were mixed with social programs in poor communities, business investments, and the purchase of assets from wealthy Colombian families, which they used to begin laundering their illegal proceeds.

Fortunately, there were Colombians who rejected the growing links between drug trafficking and politics and who were steadfast in publicly denouncing these activities. The most famous case was that of former Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, a fierce opponent of the narcos who denounced their infiltration of Congress and played a pivotal role in the government's declaration of war on drug trafficking. Lara Bonilla openly advocated the extradition of the principal drug lords, something rejected by the Congress due the levels of infiltration mentioned earlier and other signs of legislative corruption.

After the assassination of Lara Bonilla on April 30, 1984, the government adopted measures to eradicate illicit crops; it declared war on the Medellín and Cali cartels and once again proposed the extradition of drug kingpins. This unleashed a wave of retaliatory violence which resulted in the murder, on August 18, 1989, of then-presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento; Galán had endorsed extradition and had publicly denounced Pablo Escobar—at the time a member of Congress—for his ties to drug trafficking. The country watched in horror as Antioquia Police Commander Valdemar Franklin Quintero was also murdered on the same day. Two other presidential candidates were also murdered: Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa on March 22, 1990, and Carlos Pizarro Leongómez on April 26, 1990.

Other acts of terrorism at that time included the bombing of the headquarters of the Department of Administrative Security (*Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*, DAS) on December 6, 1989, that left nearly 70 dead and some 600 people wounded. There were also bombings and attacks against media outlets that had denounced the criminal activities of drug trafficking organizations. Guillermo Cano, then-director of the newspaper *El Espectador*, was murdered and later a car bomb was detonated outside that newspaper; the headline the following day read, “*Seguimos Adelante*” (We Will Carry On).

Other unforgettable acts of terrorism included the mid-flight bombing of an Avianca flight that left 107 dead—the attack was apparently directed against César Gaviria, Luis Carlos Galán's successor in the presidential campaign; two bombs detonated in shopping centers in Bogotá on Mother's Day on May 13, 1990, killing 14 and wounding more than 100; and a car bomb

outside the bullfighting ring in Medellín on February 16, 1991, that killed 22. Colombian society was put on notice that this was the war against narco-trafficking, in addition to the FARC's and the ELN's ongoing war against Colombian society. As Llorente and McDermott's paper notes, the war between the Cali and Medellín cartels generated many more attacks in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The Medellín cartel, whose most (in)famous leaders were Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, Carlos Lehder, and the Ochoa brothers, emerged in the late 1970s. Initially the cartel smuggled coca base to Colombia from Ecuador and Peru and processed it in Medellín. The profits from these illegal activities led to the cartel's economic growth and to the expansion of an armed capability in order to protect illicit activities. By the end of the 1980s, the cartel had established a military apparatus with more than 2,000 men. The drug trafficking business began to take over areas of Colombian territory for the cultivation and processing of drugs. As noted earlier, the armed forces and the National Police were excessively small, due to a decision of the country's political leadership to leave no space for a military coup. Drug traffickers built clandestine landing strips in the Colombian jungle from which light aircraft took off for other points in Colombia, where the planes were loaded with drugs bound for the United States and returned with millions of dollars in cash. Through their amassed economic power the *capos* bribed whomever was necessary in order to carry on their illicit activities and killed those who refused to be bribed.

"When *Forbes* magazine in 1987 first featured Colombians on its list of the world's wealthiest men, many were surprised to find that those included were not the heads of the major economic groups, but rather, Pablo Escobar and Jorge Luis Ochoa and his family."² The *capos* of the Medellín cartel became known as "philanthropists," building housing developments, soccer fields, and public arenas, filling a social void left by the absence of the state. Through cash and in-kind donations, the cartels began to earn the affection of many people from lower socio-economic sectors in Medellín and Cali—coopting, for example, a significant part of the network of taxi drivers in Cali.

The Medellín cartel joined forces with other drug traffickers to prevent at any cost the government's signing of an extradition treaty with the

United States. They called themselves *Los Extraditables* (the Extraditables), adopting the slogan, “Better a grave in Colombia than a prison in the United States.” It was said that in 1987, Pablo Escobar offered a million pesos for every dead police officer, which led to the murder of several police by *sicarios* (hired assassins). As highlighted in *Semana* magazine, “Luis Carlos Galán, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and Guillermo Cano are Pablo Escobar’s most famous victims, but many of the 5,000 murders for which he is thought to be responsible have been forgotten. Judges, magistrates, politicians, journalists and police officers who dared to oppose him and did not give in to his blackmail and threats paid the highest price—their lives.”³

The Cali cartel was the other infamous Colombian cartel at that time, led by the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, Miguel and Gilberto. Other key members included José Santacruz Londoño, Helmer Herrera Buitrago, Víctor Patiño Fómeque, Henry Loaiza Ceballos, and Phanor Arizabaleta Arzayuz. The Cali and Medellín cartels waged war with one another, using car bombs, kidnappings, disappearances, and the torture of family members, employees, lawyers and *sicarios* in any way related to their rivals. The Cali cartel financially supported “Los PEPES” (Persecuted by Pablo Escobar, *Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar*), a group of former members of the Medellín cartel and paramilitaries who carried out terrorist attacks against individuals linked to the Medellín cartel. As part of the struggle for control of drug trafficking routes and business, the Cali cartel provided counterintelligence to Colombian government agencies on hideouts, arms caches, front men, and allies of the Medellín cartel. It had previously been impossible for the government to obtain such information—even with the support of the United States and the strength of its counterintelligence capabilities—due to the broad network of collaborators the cartels had established in a number of different state entities.

After the death of Pablo Escobar in 1993, the Cali cartel took over a large part of the U.S. drug market and established an alliance with Amado Carrillo, known as *El Señor de los Cielos* (the Lord of the Skies), who at that time led the Juárez cartel in Mexico. It is rumored that this partnership once managed to smuggle 14 tons of cocaine in a single commercial flight.

Around the same time, illegal armed groups—the FARC, ELN, and paramilitaries—had been getting involved in the drug trafficking business,

initially through “taxes” collected from coca growers (*impuesto al gramaje*) and later expanding across the entire chain, from the growing of crops to processing to sales. After the death of the *capos* of the Cali and Medellín cartels, guerrilla groups and paramilitaries were able to take over a larger proportion of the drug trafficking business. Through drug profits, these groups expanded throughout the country, funding their military apparatus as well as terrorist attacks. Here the contrast between Colombia and Mexico is significant; as Llorente and McDermott explain, “while Mexico has had small guerrilla groups – the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) and the now dormant Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) – they are not players in the drug-fuelled violence, nor involved in any significant way in drug trafficking, unlike their Colombian counterparts of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN).”⁴ The political and social rise of drug trafficking organizations in Colombia reached its peak in 1994, with the penetration of then-candidate Ernesto Samper’s presidential campaign by funds from the Cali cartel. This gave rise to some of the greatest political, institutional, and international tensions ever experienced in Colombia.

The discussion above serves to illustrate the consequences for Colombia of the cartels’ expansion of their influence and activities, using an increasing number of strategies to intimidate, penetrate, and delegitimize institutions. Citizens, analysts, and observers began to feel that everything was lost, that the country was on the verge of becoming a failed state, and that it was best to look for a future abroad. Colombians from all walks of life emigrated in large numbers, including many young students, recent graduates, and professionals, causing a massive brain drain. The political discourse of a failed state, coupled with the popular perceptions at the time, created the worst possible kind of scenario. As feelings of insecurity grew, impunity and the state’s weakness began to drive away investment, employment, confidence, and international cooperation.

While drug trafficking is clearly a transnational problem requiring multinational solutions, every country is nonetheless responsible for doing everything in its power within its own borders to combat this scourge; drug trafficking threatens institutions, undermines the economy, and destroys opportunities for younger generations. Indeed, in Colombia today we have more addicts domestically than we ever would have imagined possible, as the strategy of the cartels has

been to develop a national as well as international consumer market.

The Relevance of Plan Colombia and the Democratic Security Policy

During the 1990s, President Bill Clinton launched a robust campaign against drug consumption in the United States; toward the end of that decade, in 1998, Andrés Pastrana was sworn in as president of Colombia. He personally was responsible for the initiative that developed into Plan Colombia, a proposal designed to reduce the power of the Colombian drug cartels through joint action to strengthen and professionalize the Colombian armed forces, improve the quality of the country's military equipment in order to neutralize drug traffickers' air capabilities, and make social investments in the areas of drug cultivation, to promote crop substitution along with the eradication of coca and poppy fields.

One of the greatest accomplishments of Pastrana's efforts to achieve peace was the restoration of the legitimacy of the Colombian state in the eyes of the international community; the penetration of drug money in the 1998 presidential campaign had led to the cancellation of the Colombian president's U.S. visa and subsequently to the decertification of the country under U.S. law. Along with renewed international legitimacy came Andrés Pastrana's success in obtaining financial assistance from the United States, Europe, and other countries. The FARC, ELN, and the AUC paramilitaries were designated as terrorist organizations. With these changes the capabilities of Colombia's security institutions improved considerably. This allowed President Álvaro Uribe from his first day in office to provide a new direction in the fight against illegal armed actors, this time involving all of Colombian society.

While there are some who consider Plan Colombia a failure, the truth is that without its strategic vision, it would not have been possible to halt the exponential growth, year after year, of illegal crops or, over a period of ten years, halve the area planted with coca. Neither, of course, would Colombia have achieved the subsequent victories over the guerrilla groups if it were not for the expansion of Plan Colombia after September 11, 2001, to include anti-terrorist in addition to counter-drug activities. As Raúl Benítez has indicated,

“Given its significant economic, social, and political impact, cocaine trafficking undermined efforts already underway in the region to rebuild and strengthen weak states and transformed U.S. counter-narcotics assistance to focus on battling the most profitable product in the world.”⁵

The involvement of the United States forced Colombian cartels to change their drug trafficking routes, transforming Mexico, Central America, and in recent years, Venezuela, into the principal transit areas. These shifts strengthened Mexican traffickers who, unlike their Colombian counterparts, found it easy to organize armed groups to protect their activity given, in part, their easy access to arms markets across the border in the United States. According to one study cited by Benítez,

“Lax gun laws in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona facilitate purchases of small arms and their trafficking across the [U.S.-Mexico] border. In addition, ...there are 5,500 federally licensed firearms dealers across the country, and more than 5,000 gun shows held annually in the United States where firearm sales, licenses, and reporting are not required.”⁶

Under these conditions, Mexican criminal groups grew stronger from 2006 onward, a time at which the administration of President Felipe Calderón declared war on the cartels. In Mexico as in Colombia, there was an initial failure to diagnose the gravity of the drug problem and its consequences for the civilian population. Our institutions came late to the recognition that there was a need for coordinated action that respected the constitution, strengthened citizens’ trust in the government and the government’s ability to protect, and at the same time emphasized within state institutions the need to act with absolute respect for human rights. At the beginning of the Uribe administration, the Colombian Ministry of Defense, with the support of the U.S. Embassy, created the first Human Rights School within the Colombian army. Due to this initiative, today Colombia’s armed forces are among the most knowledgeable and committed to the norms and principles of International Humanitarian Law. This did not prevent, however, the serious and lamentable cases known as “false positives” [extrajudicial killings designed to look like combat deaths] that took place beginning in 2005.

One of the advantages Colombia enjoyed in its fight against drug trafficking

was the support of the George W. Bush administration, in terms of military equipment as well as technical assistance for the military and police as well as for the judiciary, through the *Fiscalía* (Prosecutor General's office). In Mexico (as was and to a certain extent still is the case in Colombia), security and justice policies lack coordination. They are piece-meal and the actions of different agencies of the state do not follow a coordinated action plan with short- or long-term goals that would increase the likelihood of success in impeding the growth of the drug cartels and neutralizing their ability to inflict damage on society.

Unlike what the detractors of the DSP claim—and Llorente and McDermott imply—the DSP did not have two parallel agendas, one centered on counterinsurgency and another aimed at peace negotiations with the paramilitaries. Both the text of the DSP and the Ministry's public statements pointed to the legal and moral obligation to combat both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. Part of the Uribe government's agenda was to end paramilitarism as an actor in the conflict, given the profound impact that paramilitary organizations had on criminality and the country's high murder rates. That said, the process with the paramilitaries was carried out by the Uribe administration's peace commissioner and was independent of the DSP, which fell under the responsibility of the Defense Ministry.

With the DSP and its five strategic objectives, the Military Planning Guide, and the National Police's New Strategic Plan, the government took on very complex challenges. These included improving the quality of civilian control of the armed forces, such that civilians had high levels of participation and leadership in the design and implementation of the military strategy and achieved high levels of understanding and oversight of the internal functioning of the different forces. Other challenges involved establishing civilian oversight of military spending through the centralization of purchases; including representatives of the private sector in some of the internal working sessions of the Ministry; redesigning the security forces' logistics system (SILOG) with members of the private sector; participating in the design of a plan to increase military presence throughout the nation's territory; and including as a strategic objective of the DSP improvements in the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of various areas of the Ministry of Defense. This last element was of particular importance to President Uribe, who insisted repeatedly on acting with transparency in

order for the security forces to gain legitimacy and the trust of the citizenry. That trust has been achieved but at the time amounted to a significant challenge.

The Ministry's effort to promote the mass demobilization of guerrilla fighters—beginning with the rank-and-file and then moving to more senior members—was criticized at the time both by the commander of the armed forces and numerous sectors of society. But it was been singularly successful in removing hundreds of underage combatants from the guerrilla ranks and from the frontlines of the conflict. The process has also provided the armed forces with intelligence on the internal organization, financing, logistics, support, and drug trafficking activities of the guerrillas, information which was instrumental to the military victories achieved since 2005. The policy also led to an irremediable breach of trust between rank-and-file guerrillas and their commanders; the fear that fighters would demobilize and subsequently provide information to the government led on several occasions to summary executions, compounding the loss of trust within guerrilla organizations.

The DSP drew national and international recognition for its early positive results. A particularly successful campaign was the recovery of roads from guerrilla control through *Vive Colombia, Viaja por Ella* (Experience Colombia, Travel the Country), which was based in part on the earlier *Plan Meteoro* implemented by the Pastrana administration to reduce terrorist activities on the country's highways. Another successful initiative was the restoration of governance in almost 200 municipalities where threats, extortion, and death threats by the guerrillas had forced mayors or members of town councils to cease their work or flee altogether. These early results were possible because of the strong coordination between all the force commanders and the establishment of Joint Task Forces and high mountain battalions in the corridors used to move kidnap victims. Immediate reaction forces were instrumental in combating kidnapping; the civilian population was encouraged to report kidnappings immediately to the authorities, rather than enter an uncertain process of negotiating ransom. This was especially important considering that in many cases, the kidnappers demanded up to three separate ransom payments, only to murder the victim in the end.

The culture of immediate reaction, the reorganization of the Unified Action

Groups for Personal Liberty (GAULA), coordination between the GAULAs, the military, the police, and the DAS, and the offer of rewards facilitated the rescue of several kidnapping victims. These successes increased citizens' trust and built support throughout the country for the work of the security forces and the security strategy overall. The Joint Task Forces gradually began to overcome fragmentation within the security forces at both the intelligence and operational levels. Of course, it will take years, if not decades, to fully implement and consolidate cultural and institutional changes. Doctrinal differences continue to generate friction, competition, jealousy, and even institutional mistrust, albeit to a far lesser extent than ten years ago.

Most important since the beginning of the DSP was the reduction in criminal activity. This was due fundamentally to a radical change in attitude on the part of the security forces. By presidential mandate and through the coordination of the Ministry of Defense, the security forces left their barracks and police stations to protect citizens' lives and public goods. Thus began the security forces' permanent presence on the highways, in the streets, and in rural areas and towns, shifting from reaction to prevention and the better protection of citizens' lives and liberty. This change of attitude was reflected in the weakening of the guerrilla groups, the ever more frequent and effective military strikes, the recovery of territory, and the rescue of kidnapping victims (with tragic exceptions, such as when the guerrillas executed their hostages).⁷ As Llorente and McDermott explain, this shift was made possible largely because of the considerable increase in the defense and security budget beginning with the Pastrana administration; the budget increased substantially more as a result of the wealth tax presented to Congress early in the Uribe administration. With these new resources the government decided to increase the size of security forces by 50 percent. The principal emphasis was on the armed forces, but the police force also grew so that it could establish a greater presence in rural areas through specialized gendarmerie units (*carabineros*) created for that purpose. Hence, U.S. resources and the economic efforts of Colombian citizens together served to improve institutional capacities for combat and operations of a preventive nature.

One of the difficulties in the struggle against narco-trafficking has been the limited support offered by neighboring countries, particularly Venezuela

and Ecuador. Government intelligence agencies and citizens have detected guerrilla camps used for both training and rest and relaxation across the border into neighboring territory. Arms flows into Colombia also come from these countries.⁸ Surprisingly, what the studies in this collection ignore is the successful effort of the Ministry of Defense in 2002 and 2003 to sign cooperation agreements with Brazil, Peru, and Panama in the areas of security, defense, and counter-narcotics. These agreements led to close collaboration, especially in the southern part of the country, and opened the way for coordinated bilateral and tri-partite border operations with Brazilian and Peruvian authorities. In 2003, the Ministry negotiated similar cooperation agreements with Israel, France, and Spain. This paved the way for a new era of military cooperation with Colombia, overcoming the isolation resulting from the infiltration of drug money in President Samper's presidential campaign. Surely it is the case that international cooperation in the security, intelligence, judicial, and counter-narcotics arenas, with the United States as well as Central America and the Caribbean, will be key to improving the results in Mexico.

Should Mexican Cartels Be Designated as “Terrorist”?

One could argue that the increasing frequency and magnitude of Mexican drug cartel operations would justify designating them as narco-terrorist groups. There are also many who would reject such a designation, for the potentially negative consequences it would have for investor and tourist confidence in Mexico. An overview of recent actions by the cartels, however, raises the question as to whether such a classification would equip the Mexican government with more legal and judicial tools to fight the cartels. Consider, for example, the following episodes: on Independence Day in 2008, a bomb detonated in Morelia left eight dead and more than 100 injured; in Juárez in 2010, 13 high school students and two adults were killed, along with three others linked to the U.S. Consulate; that same year, 19 inmates were murdered at a rehabilitation center in Chihuahua; a July car bomb killed four; on July 17 an armed attack in Torreón left 17 dead and 18 injured; on August 24, 2010, 72 Central Americans were murdered in Tamaulipas; that same month, an arson attack in a Monterrey casino left 52 dead.

In August 2011, during the International Conference on Democratic Security and Justice, José Narro, the highly-regarded dean of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), said that one should not use the term terrorist to refer to the Mexican cartels. According to Narro, those arrested for the 52 deaths in the Monterrey casino fire stated that, “we meant to frighten, but things got out of hand,” indicating the absence of a political, ideological, or religious agenda. As Benítez indicates, “earlier, similarly violent acts, such as the assassination of 72 foreign migrants (the majority from Central America) at Rancho San Fernando, Tamaulipas, on August 24, 2010, were described as criminal, not terrorist, acts even though they resulted in many civilian casualties.”⁹ At some point, it would be worth considering whether designating the cartels as terrorists would facilitate the passage of emergency legislation that would strengthen institutional capacities and improve institutional and interagency integration and coordination in Mexico, in order to more efficiently meet the challenge posed by the cartels.

The current situation faced by Mexican citizens is alarming. There are said to be eight cartels operating in the country,

“the Arellano Félix cartel, the Gulf cartel, the Pacific cartel, La Familia, the Knights Templar, Beltrán Leyva, the New Juárez cartel, and the Zetas... Colombia, together with Bolivia and Peru, is the epicenter of cocaine production in the hemisphere. Ecuador and Venezuela are used by the Mexican and Colombian cartels as transit countries, while Chile and Argentina—havens for the supply of precursor chemicals—are used as launching points for the export of drugs to Africa and Europe. Brazil today is, unfortunately, the greatest consumer of drugs in Latin America, as well as the largest provider of precursor chemicals to process cocaine.”¹⁰

The growth and military and economic strengthening of the cartels are due to the increase in drug consumption and to the involvement of new countries in the drug trade; Mexican cartels are currently said to be operating in more than 28 countries.

The growth of these criminal organizations has had serious social consequences for Mexican society, ever more similar to what faced: the creation of large private security services and the formation of paramilitary

groups of an offensive, defensive, and reactive nature. Young people from the poorest neighborhoods increasingly see armed activity and involvement in gangs of hired killers as sources of income, in contrast to their limited access to education and employment opportunities. This scenario points to the need for a coordinated strategy that involves national as well as local and municipal authorities, with specific tasks and roles assigned to each.

Does Mexico Have a Comprehensive Policy to Combat Drug Violence?

The fight against corruption and drug trafficking is a task for all of society. As such it requires work at the highest level with academia, the private sector, the judiciary, and political parties to identify the institutional and legal voids that allow corruption to penetrate both society and the state structure. Corruption is like a rabbit warren through which the cartels build a network of accomplices and supporters that, little by little, paralyzes the state's ability to fight drug trafficking and its crimes against the population, institutions, and perhaps in the future, the system itself.

Drug trafficking in Mexico, as in Colombia and Brazil, involves a struggle for territory which frequently involves the civilian population at home as well as extraterritorial activities and presence, in alliance with associates outside the country. This once again underscores the urgent need for intelligence work and for international cooperation to identify criminal networks and their modes of operation and the elements of the value chain—from the precursor chemicals and weapons markets to wholesale distribution to street sales. Mexican and Colombian organizations have become truly transnational organized criminal enterprises that present serious threats beyond national borders. A report by Mexico's Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, PGR) revealed that the Pacific cartel led by "Chapo" Guzmán, the most powerful cartel in Mexico that is frequently compared to the Medellín cartel, has a presence in 13 areas across Latin America, while their closest rivals (and former allies), the Zetas and the Gulf cartel, operate in nine countries. Other cartels also share various territories, though to a lesser extent.

It is probable that the Zetas will be weakened following the killing of their

leader, Heriberto Lazcano, in Coahuila. The challenge for the Mexican government at this point is to avoid repeating what happened in Colombia: after the major cartels collapsed and the paramilitary groups that controlled a significant portion of the business were demobilized, the police, the justice system, and other state agencies failed to respond adequately, thereby allowing the business to be taken over by smaller groups that are harder to detect. As a result of Lazcano's death, it's likely other cartels will struggle to gain control of the Zetas's markets while the Zetas themselves reorganize in an attempt to hold onto the markets they already control. The state must be strengthened militarily to counter these criminal groups. As Benítez describes in his chapter:

“Colombia has supported its armed forces through Plan Colombia with the delivery of Black Hawk helicopters from the United States; between the government's own purchases and U.S. assistance, they have more than 80 helicopters. In contrast, the Mexican armed forces only have 12. Whereas the Colombian military budget is the largest in Latin America as a percentage of GDP and of the nation's budget (8.16 percent), Mexico has one of the smallest budgets of the region: 0.49 percent of GDP, and 2.65 percent of the national budget. Furthermore, in 2010 the Colombian military had 268,242 members, while the Mexican military had a total of 258,439. Given that Colombia's 2010 population was 45,659,000 compared to Mexico's 107,431,000, the size of the military force in Colombia per capita is 2.3 times that of Mexico.”¹¹

As Benítez points out, support from the United States was certainly fundamental to the strengthening of the armed forces. At the same time, the recognition and support from Colombian citizens and political parties as well as the significant commitment of the security forces were also essential for the DSP to achieve results in combating drug trafficking. Real success depends on the government's ability to unite all the major sectors of society, as did Colombia with the DSP. In 2002, the Ministry of Defense circulated a draft of the policy among academics (of both the left and right), businessmen and the major unions, and retired military and police officers to raise awareness about the need for unified national action against drug trafficking, not only as a matter of political will but also of determination on the part of society as a whole.

It is necessary for Mexico to do what we did in 2002 and 2003—undertake an effort to train the media and promote better and more specialized knowledge of security, democracy, and human rights issues across society. Universities and think tanks can contribute by improving the quality of training of government officials from different agencies and promoting merit-based career development, not only in the security forces, but also in the judiciary and other parts of the government charged with combating insecurity in Mexico, thereby maintaining citizens' trust in the country's institutions on account of their legitimacy.

Mexico shares a more than 3,000 kilometer-long border with the United States. More than 90 percent of the traceable arms used by the cartels and of the illegal drugs consumed in the United States cross that border. Without a doubt the security of Mexico is a national security concern for the United States. This is why former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke about the United States' shared responsibility for what happens in Mexico and about the importance of the Mérida Initiative. With the support of the U.S. Congress, Plan Mérida authorized \$1.9 billion in assistance for Mexico, similar to Plan Colombia.¹² Several Plan Mérida projects are already underway in Mexico and will soon show positive results, as occurred in Colombia.

One area in which U.S. assistance could achieve better results in Mexico than it did in Colombia has to do with the design and implementation of a reliable, centralized information system for the reporting of criminal activities linked to drug trafficking. Such a system would track the number of federal crimes, the number of crimes that are reported; how many crimes are prosecuted and punished; what the tendency of statistics on murders linked to drug trafficking (as compared to other types of homicide) is; how much violence is linked to other criminal organizations; how many kidnappings there are; what the rate of growth of kidnappings and massacres is; who the actors involved are; what is the relationship between drug traffickers and other criminal actors; what is the typology of kidnappings; what is the increase of victimization rates by state; and how to track statistics together with municipal authorities, in order to allow the state to direct its actions and presence in ways that achieve the greatest efficiency.

As noted in the other papers of this series, it is fundamental that political

parties, academia, the media, business leaders, and civil society in general understand that the fight against corruption involves everyone. All must surround the government with their firm support, acknowledging that there are groups that carry out terrorist activities and not being afraid to call them as such, as there is no justification for these kinds of activities that affect the civilian population and the Mexican people as a whole.

Novel and Strategic Elements of the DSP

There are several elements of the DSP's design and implementation that few people mention, unjustifiably focusing only on its military components and suggesting that it overlooked human rights issues and the need to coordinate with other ministries and state entities. This criticism is not valid.

First, the Comprehensive Border Security Plan (*Plan de Seguridad Integral de Fronteras*) stated that

“...the exercise of sovereignty cannot be limited to controlling borders in order to guarantee territorial integrity. It requires a more efficient exercise of the functions of the state and the improvement of living conditions for the population in these areas.”¹³

Hence, under the coordination of the Ministry of Defense, the government brought together the Education, Interior, Foreign Relations, and Social Protection ministries to establish a presence along with the security forces, the DAS, and the National Department of Statistics Administration (DANE). This was aimed at undertaking a census and responding to the most urgent needs, with the design of programs for basic supplies, hospital, and education infrastructure, to offer medium- and long-term solutions to the security, health, and education needs in border areas. This is what we called the “Social Sovereignty Plan for Border Areas” (*Plan de Soberanía Social en las Fronteras*), which was not continued when we left office.

The massive program designed initially for the demobilization of 6,000 guerrilla combatants and the plan to protect demobilized fighters and child soldiers also showed good results. These programs, regulated under Presidential Decree 128 of 2003, were aimed at offering a viable, flexible,

and rapid alternative for starting life over again, reconnecting with family, and abandoning clandestine life once and for all. The government invited Colombians—adults as well as children—who were members of illegal armed organizations to lay down their weapons.¹⁴ The goal of the program was to weaken the guerrillas' cohesion and military capability. Due to the immediate success of the program, peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo later extended it to the AUC paramilitaries. A total of 52,403 people were demobilized through these efforts.¹⁵ The government was committed to re-socializing and restoring the dignity of the demobilized, especially young combatants, thereby aiding reconciliation and preserving the lives of Colombians. The demobilized received psychological assistance and had access to job training programs for 18 months to enable them to lead a dignified life, one useful to their families and society.

Our responsibility as the state was to offer alternatives to the demobilized, recognizing that these people require support and training to aid their reinsertion. We achieved solid results: many former combatants now have decent employment and live in freedom with their families. The government's policy took into account that many of those actively involved in the armed conflict do so under coercion or as a result of dire economic need; many do not have any training that might help them join the labor market. Irregular groups take advantage of this situation in order to recruit members.

The fifth strategic objective of the DSP focused on "Efficiency, Transparency, and Accountability." As stated in the DSP:

"Just as citizens help strengthen the security forces through their taxes, the government and the security forces will follow the principles of efficiency, transparency and austerity in the use of those resources...The government will always act within a legal framework. Human rights and international humanitarian law will be rigorously observed, as required by the Constitution and the law. Any human rights violations or abuses committed by a member of the security forces or any other state entity will be punished without hesitation with disciplinary measures or criminal prosecution where appropriate..."¹⁶

Finally, we designed a matrix of responsibilities guided by the principle of shared responsibility, with the aim of coordinating the work of every ministry, administrative department, presidential program, and state agency. After a cabinet meeting with the heads of every government agency, the Ministry assigned responsibility for specific missions in support of the DSP and established levels of commitment for each of the agencies. This matrix was not continued by those who succeeded us in the Ministry, but its existence demonstrates what we have said over all these years—that the DSP was conceived and executed as a truly joint effort, incorporating a variety of perspectives, including those of every government entity, the justice sector, civil society, academia, the private sector, and private security firms. The goal was to guarantee the protection and freedom of every Colombian citizen, to neutralize the ability of illegal groups to control public resources at the local level by virtue of their control of territory, and to permanently dismantle armed organizations that at one time had thought it would be possible to take power by force of arms.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Mexico

- Do not underestimate the magnitude of the threat posed by drug trafficking to life, citizen security, trust in institutions, and the preservation of the democratic system.
- Evaluate without preconceptions whether Mexico has the necessary institutions, legal norms, and exceptional or emergency measures to combat drug trafficking.
- Evaluate without preconceptions whether it makes sense to designate drug trafficking activity as terrorist, in order to develop appropriate emergency legislation and further limit drug traffickers' international options.
- Come to agreement on the nature of the problem and develop an action plan with the participation of the security forces, civil society, and academia, with unequivocal leadership from the president at the national level as well as the capacity for local action as defined.

- Develop a training policy that ensures that every institution of the state respects human rights.
- Develop a comprehensive, long-term state policy to combat the threat;
- Generate a culture of shared responsibility among government agencies and with the public for fighting and neutralizing drug-related violence, with indicators for monitoring.
- Establish think tanks and research centers in the major universities and observatories to monitor organized criminal activity and pull together statistics and analysis on ways to end impunity.
- Review the model that gives autonomy to each of the military branches and to national and state-level police forces, to guarantee a unified, national chain of command and operational coordination and complementarity.
- Develop special education, job, and entrepreneurship programs to prevent the recruitment of young people by drug traffickers.

Endnotes

- 1 Dártagnan, *El Tiempo*, January 25, 1989.
- 2 “Los Otros Dueños del País,” *Revista Semana*, August 26, 1996.
- 3 “Las otras víctimas de Pablo Escobar: los héroes olvidados,” *Revista Semana*, July 21, 2012; <http://www.semana.com/gente/otras-victimas-pablo-escobar-heroes-olvidados/181078-3.aspx>.
- 4 See Llorente and McDermott essay in this volume.
- 5 See Raúl Benítez Manaut’s essay in this volume.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 In April 2003, during the attempted rescue of former Defense Minister Gilberto Echeverri and the governor of Antioquia, guerrilla forces executed 11 kidnapping victims. In another case, guerrillas mistook a routine patrol for a rescue attempt and executed their captives, a couple by the name of Bichenbach.
- 8 Following the death of FARC leader Raúl Reyes in Ecuadoran territory, President Chávez made the absurd proposal to grant belligerent status to the FARC. Countless documents from military intelligence, the United States, and other countries, as well as statements by demobilized FARC combatants, gave rise to debates in

the Colombian Congress about the presence of guerrilla camps in the territory of neighboring countries.

- 9 See Raúl Benítez Manaut, op. cit.
- 10 “Narcotráfico mexicano rebasa las fronteras del continente,” *El Tiempo*, October 8, 2012.
- 11 Raúl Benítez Manaut, op. cit.
- 12 According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service, “from FY2008 to FY2012, Congress appropriated \$1.9 billion in Mérida assistance for Mexico, roughly \$1.2 billion of which had been delivered as of April 2013.” See Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristen Finklea, “U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond,” Congressional Research Service, R41349, June 12, 2013.
- 13 Office of the President of the Republic of Colombia, Ministry of National Defense, *Democratic Defense and Security Policy*, 2003. Accessed at <http://www.oas.org/csh/spanish/documentos/Colombia.pdf>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 This represents the total number of demobilized combatants between August 2002 and January 31, 2010. Humanitarian Assistance to the Demobilized Combatant Program (*Programa de Atención Humanitaria al Desmovilizado*, PAHD), Office of the High Commissioner for Peace.
- 16 Office of the President of the Republic of Colombia, Ministry of National Defense, *Democratic Defense and Security Policy*, op. cit.



What Can Mexico Learn from Colombia to Combat Organized Crime?

JOHN BAILEY

“I shall use the lessons of Colombia.”

- Mexico's President-elect Enrique Peña Nieto, July 2012.¹

“The parties ought to learn how to form political alliances with other ideologies and stop thinking that this undermines their identity.”

- Former Colombian President César Gaviria in Toluca, State of Mexico, April 2010.²

“May the Mexican politicians forgive me, but the very first thing is to construct a state policy. The fight against drugs can't be politicized.”

- Former Colombian President Ernesto Samper, June 2011.³

Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), wants to use the “lessons of Colombia” to help shape the public security strategy for his administration (2012-2018). To that end, he invited retired General Óscar Naranjo, a former commander of the Colombian National Police, to serve as a security adviser. Two recent Mexican presidents from the National Action Party (PAN)—Vicente Fox (2000-06) and Felipe Calderón (2006-12)—also looked to Colombia for policy cues and cultivated a close exchange. Beyond policymakers, several academics, advocates, and journalists have studied Colombia's fight against guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and criminal organizations with an eye to the uses and limits of that

country's experience for other countries.⁴ The selection and depiction of such "lessons learned" becomes part of the ongoing political debate about what policies governments ought to follow.

Most of the policy-oriented work on the Colombia-Mexico comparison focuses on issues of violence and drug trafficking. In this sense, it emphasizes the relations between the armed wings of drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) and the coercive apparatus of the state, somewhat neglecting four interrelated topics: (1) the much broader category of organized crime that includes white-collar crime such as tax evasion, price-fixing, and fraud, or nonviolent enterprises engaged in counterfeiting and the like; (2) the other branches of the drug-trafficking organizations that manage the business and launder the money; (3) the multiple business firms and societal groups that benefit from trafficking; and (4) the ways in which the trafficking organizations engage with other types of criminal groups to penetrate and transform the democratic state institutions that are emerging in the two countries.

That said, it makes sense to focus on the violence that afflicts Colombia and Mexico, and on trafficking, which imposes high costs on those countries as well as the United States. It is also useful to glean what can be learned from Colombia's experience for Mexico. Thus, my commentary joins the conversation about what works to repress violence related to insurgent groups and criminal organizations and to reduce drug trafficking; but I also want to push the conversation beyond violence to consider how these issues affect democratic processes and state institutions. In the first section, I reflect on lessons learned, drawing mostly on the analyses of Colombia by María Victoria Llorente and Jeremy McDermott and of Mexico by Raúl Benítez. I don't intend to recapitulate their findings; rather, I offer my own observations. In the second section, I raise a related set of questions about the impacts of violence and trafficking on emerging democratic and state institutions.

In my view, much of the conversation about lessons learned focuses on tools and techniques that governments can use to confront insurrection and criminal violence. It emphasizes, for example, specialized training for police and military forces, real-time intelligence and rapid response, the development of strategic rather than tactical thinking, and the improvement of inter-agency coordination at a variety of levels. If the Mexican government gets the right tools for its public security toolbox and learns the right techniques, it can

bring criminal violence under control.

There's much to be said for the toolbox-techniques approach to lessons learned, and Mexico can benefit in this sense from Colombia's experience. But contexts and constraints also matter. Various factors converged in Colombia in the early 2000s that contributed to the government's advances in controlling criminal and insurgent groups; however, some of these factors remain missing in Mexico's case. Tools and techniques can contribute to strengthening Mexico's public security policies, but other key pieces are needed for success. Beyond remedies to the violence, we need to consider the ways criminal influences penetrate and shape democracy and state institutions.

Colombia's Lessons for Mexico: Contexts and Statecraft

To what extent is Colombia's experience in dealing with criminal and political violence sufficiently similar to that of Mexico to justify drawing comparisons? Here we need to look at the nature of the threats, the respective political and institutional arrangements, and the importance of time, as this affects policy learning and the emergence of tipping points.

Shared "Bottom Line": Colombia Has Limited Relevance for Mexico

The Llorente-McDermott and Benítez chapters lay out points of similarity and difference in the Colombian and Mexican cases, and emphasize the latter. They want to avoid over-simplification and politically-motivated comparisons. As Llorente and McDermott explain:

[W]hile Mexico and Colombia share most, if not all, of the symptoms of drug-fuelled violence, the conditions that generate this violence are very different. The solutions, however, may be similar: a strong presence of state institutions throughout the country, an effective justice system and law enforcement, educational and economic opportunities to provide alternatives to illicit activities, all reinforced by transparency to undermine the corrupting influence of drug money. Unfortunately,

Colombia does not yet have these conditions fully in place, and is therefore cannot be a model for Mexico.

The main difference in conditions that create violence is the central role of a political insurgency in the Colombian case, which is absent in Mexico. The overall solution to drug-related violence is a multi-faceted, whole-of-government approach, but Colombia has not yet achieved this as a working strategy. Reform of the country's justice system, for example, lags far behind advances in its security apparatus.

Time, Seriality, and Policy Learning

Analysts in the United States are too often prisoners of the present. The history of Colombia's violence stretches back into the early 19th century and covers some horrific episodes such as the War of the Thousand Days (1899-1902) and La Violencia (1946-58). Thus, whether we take 1964 (the origins of the FARC) or 1984 (the assassination of justice minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla) as arbitrary beginning points of the conflict's contemporary manifestations, Colombia has faced problems of extraordinary violence over most of its history. Mexico also had an impressively unstable 19th century, up to the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910). The Revolution of 1910-29 took perhaps a million lives. Possibly, it is the long peace of the PRI (1929-2000) which makes the country's contemporary violence so unsettling.

The political-ideological motives that drove the leftist insurrection of the FARC and the ELN, especially in the early years, also make Colombia's case much more complex than Mexico's, where criminal violence is profit-driven. To put this in perspective, the FARC at one time fielded approximately 16,000 combatants in multiple "fronts" and could amass some 1,500 fighters against a provincial capital. If we make a crude population adjustment, a similar insurrection in Mexico would equate to about 38,000 insurgents, and 3,600 fighters arrayed against a state capital.⁵ The roughly 30,000 fighters in Colombia's paramilitary self-defense forces would equal some 72,000 in Mexico. To put it mildly, Mexico's government and society would confront such disorder aggressively. Also, the United States would react much more energetically to armed conflicts of that magnitude on its southern border. Whatever the case, the leftist insurgency and the right-wing self-defense forces have been the main drivers of violence and state response in the Colombian

case, a reality which is too-easily overlooked in comparisons with Mexico.

Seriality refers to the sequence of events related to policy-making. Successful policy usually doesn't emerge full-blown on the first or second try but rather is the product of a series of trial-and-error responses. Responses at one point shape subsequent possibilities. In Colombia's case I would mention a sequence of five different types of events to illustrate the point.

1. The constitutional reforms of 1991, among other things, eroded the foundations of a party system dominated for many years by the Liberals and Conservatives and accelerated the pace of decentralization. The electoral reform subsequently opened the way for Álvaro Uribe (2002-10) to win the presidency as an independent and to put together a majority coalition in the congress to support his security policies.
2. The viciousness of Pablo Escobar's war on the Colombian state in the late 1980s and early 1990s laid bare the weakness of the state and shocked society and the political system (and the U.S. government).
3. Ernesto Samper's presidency (1994-98) vividly illuminated the degree of corrupt penetration by traffickers into his presidential campaign and the national congress.
4. Andrés Pastrana's presidency (1998-2002) showed the limits of negotiating a peace with the FARC and accelerated the build-up of the government's security forces, with substantial support from Plan Colombia.
5. Álvaro Uribe came to power in 2002 on a pledge to combat the armed insurgencies and benefited from strengthened security forces and the post-9/11 U.S. priority for fighting terrorism.⁶

Over time, Colombia's insurgent forces and criminal organizations also evolved and adapted to changing circumstances. As ideological motives declined, insurgent groups came to resemble profit-oriented criminal organizations. The lesson here is that Colombia's struggle is prolonged, and it took time and a series of events to promote learning and create openings for security gains.

Mexico's case suggests more partial measures and limited learning from the mid- 1980s to 2006 in response to escalating problems of violence and

corruption related to DTOs. We can point to a number of positive steps, such as the creation of the National Public Security System (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública) in 1995. But there wasn't a real sense of urgency until Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006. That said, Calderón's multiple initiatives for institutional reform in various arenas and levels in the federal system, strengthen President Peña Nieto's hand in security policy-making.

Presidential Statecraft and Security Policy

Álvaro Uribe could depend on a solid security policy coalition in the Colombian congress to support a coherent strategy (the two-pronged Democratic Security Policy) and tactical effectiveness in a number of instances. The strategy set targets, priorities, and sequences, and was adjusted to respond to changes in insurgent and criminal groups. He persuaded public opinion that the country's sustained economic growth depended on improving the security situation. He levied a "war tax" on wealthier Colombians, which helped finance the security program. In this effort, he adroitly used symbols such as patriotism, narco-terrorism, and insurgency to his advantage both domestically and in forging a strong partnership with the United States. The democratic security strategy produced mixed results, arguably working better against the FARC than against the self-defense forces or criminal organizations. Homicide rates and kidnapping also declined substantially up to 2008 before beginning to creep back up. The Colombian record against drug trafficking is complex, but the government could at least claim success in reducing the acreage under coca cultivation.

That said, we should not ignore the dark side and negative lessons of Uribe's presidency. Apart from human rights abuses by the Colombian armed forces, noted below, Uribe's office allegedly used the national intelligence service (the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad—DAS) to spy on political adversaries and other government agencies, including the Supreme Court. His congressional coalition included members with ties to the self-defense forces.⁷

President Felipe Calderón's security policy was less successful than Uribe's, at least as perceived by Mexican public opinion. His decision to deploy 25,000 army personnel and federal police to several states to confront criminal organizations within days of taking office surprised the public. His critics could

credibly attribute the decision to an effort to legitimize his presidency in the wake of a sliver-thin electoral victory. A coherent policy to combat organized crime took shape by August of 2008, but Calderón's government struggled to explain it clearly to the public. The policy also ran into severe problems in its implementation. For example, joint operations between military and federal police worked poorly, and there was no obvious sense of priorities or sequencing. Deployments seemed to react to crises or atrocities, and there was little progress in inter-agency coordination to strengthen communities afflicted by criminal violence. Moreover, the president was unable to quell the infighting between his secretary of public security and the attorney general, or among the police and armed forces, and he complained frequently about indifference or opposition by governors and mayors. Further, his long list of institutional reforms, e.g., reform of the justice system, seemed bogged down and unproductive. But most of all, Calderón's policy was overwhelmed by the continuous escalation in crime-related violence that resulted in some 60,000 deaths as of late summer 2012.

On the political side, Calderón was unable to build a strong coalition around his security policy. In contrast to Uribe's adroit use of symbols to mobilize support, Calderón called for a "war" against organized crime and once donned a military uniform to review the troops. He resisted the use of terms like "insurgency" or "terrorism" to characterize the struggle, even though he described the August 2011 fire-bombing of a Monterrey casino an "act of terror and barbarism." The result was confusion. This was relevant because, as Benítez points out, some actors in the United States have a tendency to conflate criminal violence with insurgency and terrorism, which might support further militarization of the fight against organized crime.⁸

Calderón frequently called for a "state policy" against crime, but he used security as a wedge issue against opposition parties on several occasions. In a federal system of 32 state governors and over 2,000 city mayors, partisan interests regularly trumped effective cooperation. The main lesson, according to former Colombian presidents Pastrana and Samper, as cited in the epigraphs above, is that Mexican politicians need to find a way to put security policy above partisan advantage.

Tools and Tactics that Can Travel with Traction

There is ample support for three points: (1) the Colombian government significantly improved its tools and tactics to repress insurgent groups and criminal gangs; (2) the U.S. government played a central role in providing equipment, training, and on-the-ground assistance; and (3) Mexico can put many of these tools to good use to repress criminal organizations. Mexico's cooperation with the U.S. government, however, is more complicated than is Colombia's.

The central element of this discrepancy is that after 1992 the Colombian government built a much bigger security toolbox and developed more effective tools. As Benítez points out in his paper, Colombia in 2010 spent more on its armed forces (8.16 percent of the central government budget) than any other country in Latin America, in contrast to Mexico, which spent only 0.49 percent of its GDP and 2.65 percent of the budget on its armed forces. One result is that Colombia's armed forces were 2.3 times larger per capita than Mexico's in that year.

Beyond investing in a bigger toolbox and better hammers, as positive lessons from Colombia I would underline:

- Efforts to think in strategic terms with respect to priorities and sequences;
- The use of a pilot project of integral action before scaling up to larger efforts;⁹
- Improvements in inter-agency coordination, both among the armed forces and between these and the police, particularly in tactical operations;¹⁰
- Creation of a ministry of defense to better coordinate the police and army;
- Reform and strengthening of the National Police to improve effectiveness and achieve a presence in every municipality and major urban center;

- Specialized training and organization of armed forces units to use against insurgent and criminal organizations;¹¹ and,
- Significant improvements in intelligence and mobility.

As to negative examples, I would mention:

- Prioritizing “high-value targets,” rather than the middle rungs of trafficking organizations, which increased the violence in both cases;
- The weakness of the justice system and its inability to deal with violent crime and complex forms of organized crime; and,
- The absence of a long-term citizen security policy that gives priority to prevention.

A significant factor that complicates the easy adoption of Colombia’s lessons is that Mexican political elites are more wary of U.S. involvement in internal security matters. A neuralgic point for years has been Mexico’s prohibition against U.S. law enforcement agents’ carrying weapons on Mexican soil. As Benítez notes in his paper, “In Colombia there is no anti-U.S. ‘military nationalism’ as exists in Mexico.” Mexicans are also leery about the presence of U.S. intelligence agents, especially those from the Central Intelligence Agency.

There has been significant progress in U.S.-Mexico bilateral cooperation in conducting criminal investigations and in granting extraditions, however. Colombia used the U.S. justice system to offset the weaknesses of its own system in many cases of complex prosecutions; that option may figure more prominently in the U.S.-Mexico relationship as well.

Political and Human Rights Costs of Colombia’s Security Policies

I won’t try to summarize the extent of the human rights violations perpetrated especially by the leftist insurrection and the right-wing self-defense forces, but also by government forces. Thousands of Colombians

have been assaulted, kidnapped, robbed, or murdered since the mid-1980s. To illustrate the calculated brutality of these abuses, Llorente and McDermott relate the cases of “false positives,” in which the Colombian army murdered “up to 3,000 victims” and presented these as insurgents. As to the scope of suffering, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees cites the Colombian government’s estimate that 3.8 million citizens were registered as internally displaced between 1997 and 2011.¹² In sum, the human rights record is a major issue in any calculation of Colombia’s relevance to Mexico.

Colombia is also distinctive in Latin America for the extent to which the political left has been repressed. The Patriotic Union party, with ties to the FARC and the Colombian Communist Party, was essentially exterminated in the 1980s by murky combinations of drug gangsters and self-defense forces, with credible allegations of support from elements of Colombia’s military and intelligence apparatus. The involvement of politicians and elements of the security apparatus with paramilitary forces in repressing labor and peasant leaders, known as “parapolitics,” continued into the 21st century. This was not necessarily a deliberate policy but rather a result of official collusion and passivity. Repression of the left also exists in Mexico, but on a much smaller scale and usually at the hands of a few state governors. A positive lesson is that Mexico opened channels of legal participation for the left that reduced incentives for political insurgency.

Other Lessons: Criminal Penetration and Transformation of the State

Beyond lessons about controlling violence, we ought to begin systematic research about the ways in which government agents and criminal organizations interact over time in particular settings to shape the evolution of democratic processes and the state. Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution calls this process “competitive state-making.” The basic idea is that government agencies compete with “de facto powers” (*poderes fácticos*), including criminal organizations, about the rules of the game with respect to how democracy will work and the state will function.¹³ The process is especially volatile in settings of ongoing political and economic transitions.

The Colombian academic community developed a field of “*violentología*” in the 1980s and ’90s and produced valuable work. Since then, their agenda has shifted to study the ways in which different types of insurgent and criminal groups evolved over time in close interaction with government, the economy, and civil society. Claudia López Hernández edited an especially useful book that provides conceptual contributions and extraordinary case detail.¹⁴ A central concept in the book is *La Reconfiguración Cooptada*—the idea that both legal and illegal actors collaborate with agents of the state in order to change the constitution, laws, and decrees from inside the state in ways that specifically benefit both legal and illegal actors. An example is change in laws that make it easier to legalize land transfers that occurred in questionable circumstances.

Three examples illustrate lines of inquiry in Hernández’s book. First, the self-defense forces were generally more successful than leftist insurgent groups, such as the FARC, in penetrating the state, due in part to their close interactions with landowners and other conservative interests. Second, electoral reform and political decentralization made it easier for criminal groups to penetrate and even control municipal and departmental governments and to project influence up to the national level. Third, in many cases, the established political elites reached out to criminal organizations to form alliances. Even then, the political elites maintained room for maneuvering and self-preservation. The book goes into considerable detail to describe and analyze trends throughout the country. This is necessary because the fragile equilibriums between government agencies and criminal organizations vary widely from one locale to another.

Obviously, Mexico differs from Colombia in important respects, and I’m not trying to force the comparison. Much oversimplified, however, there is a shared dynamic in both countries. Violent criminal organizations emerge as *poderes fácticos* in the midst of fundamental economic and political transitions. The criminal organizations are dynamic and resilient and they seek alliances in the economic and political systems. In turn, some interests in the economic and political systems seek alliances with criminal organizations. These alliances compete with government agencies and pro-democracy elements of civil society to configure the state as it evolves in different forms

and locales throughout the country.

It is clear in Mexico that criminal organizations have penetrated the police, armed forces, and justice system (including prisons) from the local to the national levels. There is also evidence that criminal groups have infiltrated local and state governments.¹⁵ There have been numerous allegations that drug-related contributions have gone into local elections, and the federal government's intelligence agency raised concerns about money flowing into federal campaigns.¹⁶ In contrast to Colombia, however, we have little evidence that trafficking-related corruption has reached into Mexico's federal congress. The point to underline is that we need to move beyond anecdotes, press accounts, and isolated case studies and begin to analyze trends more systematically.

Conclusions

At an analytical level, the Colombia-Mexico comparison is valuable in showing the uses and limits of drawing lessons that can successfully travel. Some tools and tactics travel well, and policy-makers can identify, select, and put them to good use. But there are significant differences between the countries as well, related to: causes of violence, policy learning, commitment of resources, and presidential statecraft. Many critical elements remain missing in Mexico's case. Further, that Colombia has paid a terrible price for its security in terms of human rights abuses is typically undervalued.

That said, in a region suffering high levels of criminal violence, policy-makers are eager to find success stories, and some will continue to portray Colombia's experience as a lesson plan. My sense is that scholars will continue trailing behind them for some time to come, emphasizing the limits and distinctiveness of the case and pleading for caution.

Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in “Usaré las lecciones de Colombia,” *La Jornada*, July 5, 2012. (Lajornada.unam.mx)
- 2 “Los partidos deben saber hacer alianzas políticas con otras ideologías y dejar de creer que esto mina su identidad.” Quoted in Francisco Cruz Jiménez, *Tierra Narca* (México, D.F.: Editorial Planeta, 2010): 20-21.
- 3 Former President Ernesto Samper quoted in “Lucha anti-drogas no debe politizarse,” *El Universal*, June 23, 2011. (ElUniversal.com.mx)
- 4 E.g., Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010); Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Lessons for Mexico from Colombia: Caveat Emptor* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, February 24, 2012); Gustavo A. Flores-Macías, “What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger? The Effects of the Militarization of Anti-Drug Efforts on State-Building,” Cornell University, Unpublished Paper; Adam Isacson, *Don’t Call it a Model: On Plan Colombia’s Tenth Anniversary, Claims of “Success” Don’t Stand Up to Scrutiny* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Office on Latin America, July 2010); Paul Rexton Kan and Phil Williams, “Afterword: Criminal Violence in Mexico – A Dissenting Analysis,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21:1 (March 2010): 218–31.; Bob Killebrew and Jennifer Bernal, *Crime Wars: Gangs, Cartels, and U.S. National Security* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2010).
- 5 Mexico’s population of 112 million is about 2.4 times larger than Colombia’s 47 million.
- 6 “A disillusioned Colombian electorate soon voted in hard-line President Alvaro Uribe with a mandate to pursue a battlefield victory. Uribe, benefiting from the \$8-billion U.S. aid package called Plan Colombia, ordered the armed forces to win back territory and rout the rebels.” Chris Kraul, “Colombia leader discloses talks with FARC rebels.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 2012 (on-line edition).
- 7 These and other abuses committed by Uribe are described in Isacson, *op. cit.*; and Daniel Wilkinson, “Death and Drugs in Colombia,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 29, 2011.
- 8 See, for example, Killebrew and Bernal, *op. cit.*, as one of several examples of such conflation.
- 9 The Plan for the Integrated Consolidation of La Macarena, as noted by Llorente and McDermott in their paper.
- 10 On the other hand, Llorente and McDermott underscore the continuing problem of coordination between the police and armed forces. They cite, for example, “the difficulty in defining roles and missions for the military and police within the current strategic environment, in which insurgents and criminal bands share territory and increasingly work together in their pursuit of drug profits.”
- 11 A useful analysis on Colombia’s armed forces can be found in Alejo Vargas

Velásquez, “Fuerzas Armadas y Políticas Antidrogas: El Caso Colombia,” in Alejo Vargas Velásquez, ed., *Fuerzas Armadas en la Política Antidrogas: Bolivia, Colombia y México* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2011): 201-41.

- 12 This would equal about 8.1 million displaced in the Mexican case. Given the 2,000-mile shared land border a significant fraction would seek refuge in the United States. United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR Global Trends 2011: A Year of Crises, June 18, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/4fd6f87f9.html> (accessed August 22, 2013).
- 13 Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*, op. cit.
- 14 See Claudia López Hernández, ed., *Y refundaron la patria... De cómo mafiosos y políticos reconfiguraron el Estado colombiano* (Bogotá: Debate, 2010). A useful collection available in English is Luís Jorge Garay Salamanca and Eduardo Salcedo-Albarán, eds., *Drug Trafficking, Corruption, and States: How Illicit Networks Reconfigure Institutions in Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico* (Bogotá: Fundación Método, 2011).
- 15 Former governor Mario Villanueva of Quintana Roo was extradited to the United States on charges of money laundering. Former governor Tomás Yarrington is under investigation for suspicion of money laundering and extortion. There are numerous allegations of collusion between local authorities and criminal groups.
- 16 As Benítez notes, “Organized crime negatively affected Mexico’s democratization process – begun in the second half of the 1980s – because of its ability to co-opt government and politics through its ‘financing’ of government officials.”

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