

Ending the Conflict with the FARC

Time for a New Course

Antonio Navarro Wolff

Introduction

Much attention is currently and understandably focused on the demobilization process with paramilitary forces and the ongoing negotiations with the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional). Nevertheless, it is essential to concentrate on how to end the conflict involving Colombia's—indeed, Latin America's—largest and most powerful insurgency, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia). Otherwise, it is hard to see how Colombia can move towards constructing an enduring foundation for peace. To be sure, demobilizing and reintegrating the FARC guerrillas is a formidable and complex challenge whose formula for success is elusive. But setting the problem aside and postponing the formulation of a strategy is likely to only make it more difficult to achieve down the road.

Negotiations, military force, and fumigation have failed to bring the battle against the FARC to an end. While these elements will be important steps toward an eventual solution, the government must also win the genuine support of the rural population. This paper analyzes why past government efforts against the FARC have failed and offers a new plan for increasing the support for the state among the people of the rural provinces. To achieve this end, the country needs a new rural development program that would establish wide-ranging land reform, viable alternative development options, youth

programs, and a strong state presence in vulnerable areas. Colombia must take these steps to deprive the FARC of its most valuable resource: peasant support.

The Colombian Conflict

Relations between the United States and Colombia cooled significantly between 1994 and 1998 following the revelation that President Ernesto Samper took major campaign contributions from the Cali drug cartel. Bilateral relations only began to thaw after Andrés Pastrana was elected in May of 1998. One of Pastrana's first visitors was General Charles Wilhelm, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Army Southern Command. His visit to Bogotá was the first by a high-ranking United States military official in four years.

The statements Wilhelm made to the press were shocking. If the war continued as it was going, the general said, the FARC would take power within the next five years. Though surprising, the declaration was based on hard evidence.

Since 1996, the FARC had embarked upon the most punishing guerrilla offensive in the country's history. Beginning in 1996 with the seizure of a military base in Las Delicias in the Amazon region, the Marxist guerrillas were systematically wiping out garrisons across eastern Colombia. This series of attacks included the destruction of many elite units, sometimes as large as battalions.

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Foreword

In 2002, the Inter-American Dialogue launched a working paper series on Colombia. We sought to devote sustained and expert attention to one of the hemisphere's most urgent challenges, with a particular emphasis on how the country could move toward greater peace and security. The aim was to stimulate a broader public debate on the complex issues facing key decision makers involved in the Colombian conflict. We offered diagnoses and interpretations of the current situation, as well as policy prescriptions that could help the country resolve its multiple and deep-seated problems.

In 2005, the Dialogue expanded the focus of the series to encompass the broader Andean region, including Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, as well as a continued focus on Colombia. The expanded scope reflects the natural evolution of a Dialogue initiative that began in June 2001 as the Colombia Working Group and is now known as the Andean Working Group. The body is comprised of a select and diverse group of analysts and policymakers from the Andean region, other Latin American countries, Europe, Canada, and the United States. The working group serves as a core of advisors, a "brain trust" for the Dialogue on the Andes, which is a central priority for the organization. The goal of the group is not necessarily to reach agreement and produce consensus documents. Rather, it is to encourage innovation and generate creative ideas and proposals that help shape thought and action on Andean challenges in constructive ways.

This paper, written by Antonio Navarro Wolff, a leader of the *Polo Democrático Independiente* party in Colombia, identifies the battle with the FARC as the key element in the Colombian situation and proposes a comprehensive solution to resolve the conflict. Navarro draws on his experience as a senator, Minister of Health, mayor, and leader of the M-19 guerrilla group to argue that neither military pressure nor negotiations alone will succeed given the FARC's defensive capabilities and enormous ambitions. Instead, he recommends that the government expand its current focus and pursue a more ambitious strategy in the rural sector, including promoting alternative crops, ending fumigation, voluntary relocation, and youth programs. Navarro's perspective does not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the Inter-American Dialogue.

Given the highly dynamic political situation throughout the Andean region, where events unfold with unusual velocity, it is nearly inevitable that some of what appears in these papers will be overtaken by new developments. However, while some of the details will seem dated, the central points and arguments remain relevant. We hope that a steady output of thoughtful interpretations of politics and relations in the Andean region will stimulate better insights on its challenges and more realistic and effective policies.

We are pleased to acknowledge the assistance provided for our work on Colombia and the Andean region by the Ford Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). We are grateful to CIDA and USIP for supporting the production of this report.

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Vice President for Policy

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In addition, dozens of police outposts were attacked and wiped out, especially in the central and southern regions of Colombia. Even where federal units didn't surrender—because they managed to get reinforcements before they were forced to turn over their arms—they soon abandoned the areas to guerrilla control.

A regular army is defeated when its elite troops begin to lose consecutive battles. A moment arises where they lose their morale completely, and, when that happens, the entire structure crumbles like a house of cards. That is what happened to Batista in Cuba in 1957 and, along with a popular uprising, to Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979.

The period described above can be called a “war of movements,” in which the irregular forces are able to coordinate units of hundreds of combatants and wage prolonged, successful battles against the armed forces of the state. If such a campaign can be sustained for enough time, an insurgent victory becomes possible.

General Wilhelm, then, was saying publicly what the high command of the Colombian military did not recognize but that rang true. Personally, I don't believe that the guerrillas could have achieved a total military victory because they didn't have sufficient popular support. Certainly, however, they demonstrated their ability to destabilize the country and render it ungovernable.

Plan Colombia

The presidents of Colombia and the United States, Andrés Pastrana and Bill Clinton, confronted the problem personally. They designed Plan Colombia, which included two components: an expansion of the fumigation of coca and poppy fields and U.S. training for the Colombian military. The cooperation with the Colombian armed forces was presented as a counter-narcotics program in

order to mitigate the controversy of involving the U.S. military in a foreign conflict. The events of September 11th have made this camouflage unnecessary.

As I will discuss below, Plan Colombia turned two previously separate conflicts—the war on drugs and the war against the guerrillas—into a single struggle. Before Plan Colombia, the war on drugs was the exclusive responsibility of the police, while the war against the insurgency essentially belonged to the armed forces. Plan Colombia united the two fronts, creating a war on “narco-terrorism.”

Continuing with the military analysis of the conflict, when General Wilhelm came to Bogotá in mid-1998, the FARC controlled the momentum in Colombia. The state forces needed to halt the wave of guerrilla victories in order to regroup and restructure. Before anything else, the armed forces needed to be able to protect themselves. In order to achieve this, the military forces gathered only in heavily fortified, nearly impregnable bases when they were in the most dangerous areas. The police, meanwhile, were concentrated in medium-sized and large cities that were very difficult for the guerrillas to attack. This concentration of forces implied abandoning enormous areas of the country that previously had a state presence.

Between 1998 and 2001, the Colombian armed forces were transformed. Aerial mobility is vital for troops to carry out operations while concentrated in bases. Thus, one of the central components of the initial phase of Plan Colombia was the purchase of 60 new transport helicopters. In addition to aerial dominance, the military significantly increased the coordination between ground and air forces, the number of professional soldiers, the amount of training, the level of technological knowledge, the efficiency of the chain of command, the scope of strate-

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gic and operational cooperation between the three branches, and the responsibility of local officers. In sum, there was a profound overhaul of the Colombian military, the effects of which were soon seen on the battlefield.

The FARC held the initiative from 1996 through 1998, but the state was able to regain momentum from 1999 to 2001 due to its renewed capacity to anticipate and respond quickly to guerrilla attacks. The tide was turning in favor of the state, which fully regained the advantage in early 2002, a presidential election year.

The Caguán Negotiations

Before I continue the analysis of the military conflict, a brief introduction to the contemporary political situation is necessary. When Andrés Pastrana assumed power in August, 1998, a new series of negotiations began between the FARC and the incoming government. This step was virtually inevitable given the public pressure for a resolution.

The discussions formally began in January, 1999 in a section of San Vicente del Caguán, a town in the Caquetá department. Caquetá had a strong FARC presence, and it was there that the group achieved their most important military triumphs. In order to prepare for the discussions, the government accepted the FARC demand that they demilitarize five towns to create a secure space for the guerrilla commanders. The area of this buffer zone totaled 42,000 km², which is double the size of El Salvador but is home to less than 100,000 residents.

The peace negotiations had an inauspicious beginning. The FARC commander did not show up to the opening of the dialogue, which was attended by President Pastrana. The images of the President sitting next to an empty seat were a troubling but accurate

omen for the talks, which made hardly any progress during their three-year duration.

The expectations of the guerrillas were undoubtedly much greater than the concessions that the government was willing to make. As an example of the lofty aspirations of the FARC, the parties spent the first few weeks preparing a 114-point agenda, covering nearly every public policy issue in Colombia.

It is understandable that the FARC entered the negotiations with ambitious expectations. They had enormous success on the battlefield between 1996 and 1998, when President Pastrana took power, and they were reluctant to give up this offensive unless most or all of their conditions were met. The public statements from the FARC make it clear that their real goal was to convert the military power they had won at gunpoint into political and institutional power. Of course, this military advantage was merely temporary and, as the following years demonstrated, reversible.

Their initial plan was to be recognized as a “belligerent force.” This is an international legal status that is now seldom-used but which did help the Sandinistas in Nicaragua gain equal footing with the Somoza government in international negotiations. The proposal illustrated how the guerrillas perceived the discussions. The FARC plan was to first be recognized as an equal partner of the Colombian state, so that they could then move on and reach an agreement on every aspect of the public organization of the country. It was not “bullets for ballots,” it was “bullets for power.” Manuel Marulanda, the leader of the FARC, stated that the guerrillas would not disarm until their power was guaranteed. He repeated ad nauseum that FARC demobilization was not a topic of discussion.

This plan by the FARC commanders was illusory and grew less and less plausible as the military conditions increasingly and visibly favored the state over the following months.

I am convinced that the guerrilla high command understood from the very beginning that their demands would not be met at the negotiation table and that they would never reach an agreement. They continued with the process, however, in order to extract any and all advantages the state would concede.

The FARC already had a similar, very successful experience, from 1984 through 1991, during the governments of Belisario Betancur and Virgilio Barco as well as the first months under César Gaviria. During this period, the FARC significantly expanded and strengthened, aided by a poorly-enforced ceasefire in the midst of fruitless peace talks.

In contrast with the previous interlude, however, the FARC did not want to paralyze their successful military campaign. Thus, they managed to restrict the ceasefire to the buffer zone around Caguán while they continued normal operations in the rest of the country.

Nevertheless, in order to protect their highest-ranking officials during the negotiations, something they have been exceptionally adept at during their four decades of insurgency, the FARC concentrated many of their best troops in Caguán. This led to a decrease in activity, but gave the FARC a protected sphere to gather their best strategists, retrain their troops, and plan new operations. In addition, the demilitarized zone became a prime area to recruit and train new fighters.

The government did not take the guerrilla actions seriously, treating them as just another negotiating tactic. Although every day brought new evidence that the discussions were failing, President Pastrana continued to give them more time.

In my estimation, President Pastrana was incapable of grasping what was really happening until it was too late for him and for the possibility of peace for Colombia.

While there was a ceasefire in Caguán, the war continued unabated in the rest of the country. When the state abandoned extensive territory in its concentration phase, it created a vacuum that was filled by the guerrillas in central and southern Colombia and by paramilitary groups in the north.

The instability and insecurity reached intolerable levels for the public. The guerrillas were kidnapping people across the country, reaching 3,000 kidnappings per year, close to 10 each day.

The paramilitaries massacred thousands of peasants, union leaders, indigenous people, and teachers, accusing them of cooperating with guerrillas. In the department of Sucre, in northern Colombia, a paramilitary group arrived in a peasant village in the morning, gathered the community and began to hack the adult men apart with chainsaws in front of their wives and children. They left the shredded corpses on a table in the center of the town, only leaving the town after the sun had set and they had murdered more than 70 people.

For Colombians, the juxtaposition of peace in the 42,000 km² of Caguán and unacceptable insecurity in the other 1.1 million km² of the country became unbearable.

It was in this volatile context that the presidential election of 2002 took place. From the beginning of his candidacy, Álvaro Uribe opposed continuing the ceasefire and the negotiations in Caguán. Initially, he stood alone. Little by little, however, as the negotiations stalled and the insecurity continued, the tide of public opinion turned in Uribe's favor. The other presidential hopefuls maintained

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their support for the peace process, hoping for a breakthrough that never came.

When the negotiations finally collapsed in February, 2002, Uribe already had an insurmountable electoral advantage. This latest effort at peace stalled due to the intransigence of the FARC and the inconsistency of the government. Months later, Uribe won the presidency in the first round.

The failure of the negotiations cost the FARC and Pastrana dearly and changed the nature of Colombian politics. Normally supportive of dialogue and generosity in the peace process, the public began to call for a hard line security policy for the first time in years.

Reclaiming the Initiative

From the moment that the negotiations with the government broke down, the FARC began a profound retreat. A few months prior they had carried out the final operation in the “war of movements” plan, using the Caguán buffer zone as a rear-guard. The FARC committed many of their best combatants there and the result was disastrous. They suffered their most significant high-level casualty in 30 years, an officer known as Uriás Cuellar. This operation resolved the internal discussion over what to do once the discussions collapsed. The choice was between launching an all-out offensive or retreating and fortifying. The FARC elected to retreat and return to a guerrilla style of combat.

The guerrillas have developed a logic that comes only from adaptation to prolonged periods of battle. During the first phase, the FARC withdrew their commanders to a more secure position, which they had carefully prepared during the three years of negotiations with Pastrana. They gave an order for all their troops to avoid combat, which lasted for two years.

The armed forces of the state, on the other hand, had the political support of the new Uribe government and took the initiative. The greater combat momentum and new military circumstances allowed the government to reclaim territory that it had abandoned years ago. Rural towns once again had police units present, and the more dangerous areas had army and coast guard forces.

This realignment provoked desertion among the guerrillas, pushing them into a program that reintegrated them into civilian life. The initiative was very successful in its initial phase, and deserters became an important and badly needed source of military intelligence. Nevertheless, this information also paved the way for human rights abuses due to the pressure for “positives,” the slang term for successful results. False incidents were reported, which led to arbitrary arrests and executions of innocent people mistaken for guerrillas.

The years 2002 and 2003 saw the greatest state victories against the insurgency. Thousands of guerrillas deserted, several guerrilla fronts were dismantled, the state occupied new territory, kidnappings decreased, and people could once again use the highways.

The total destruction of a guerrilla group near Bogotá led the government to boast openly and optimistically that victory was near at hand. They believed that they could defeat the FARC strategically. More and more, the post-conflict period was discussed as an inevitability for which people should begin preparing.

In this optimistic environment, the government took one of its most controversial military decisions in recent years. They decided to attack the strategic headquarters of the FARC, located deep in the Amazon region, in southeast Colombia. The best

troops, the best officers, and the best technology were united in “Taskforce Omega.” Its mission was to destroy the “secretariat” of the FARC, located somewhere within a 300,000 km² area of Amazon jungle.

More than two years passed and the results were meager. Not a single important member of the FARC military hierarchy had been killed or captured. The guerrillas had shown an impressive ability to successfully defend themselves. Although it was one of their highest priorities, the armed forces were unable to rescue the numerous kidnapping victims held in the area, including three Americans and former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. The concentration of the best troops and military forces in the southeast of Colombia made the government less effective in other regions. Thus, critics accused the state of poor decision-making, arguing that they should have continued their operations in regions with a less consolidated guerrilla presence. This failure interrupted what appeared to be a domino effect of victories against the FARC.

I believe that those who criticized the creation of Taskforce Omega were correct. In fact, the taskforce, with no notable victories, was dismantled without public announcement. Nevertheless, the taskforce alone cannot be blamed for the government’s failure. The true explanation lies in more complex factors, such as the lack of political will, the limits of military action, and the very nature of the conflict, which I will address below.

The government’s optimistic, triumphant attitude began to dissipate in 2004. It continued to deflate in 2005 and 2006 as victories became scarcer, the desertion rate among the guerrillas decreased, and the FARC once again began to carry out successful operations. This is the current status of the confronta-

tion with the guerrillas and the history of the Colombian conflict over the last 42 years: a mutually destructive impasse in which neither side can gain a decisive advantage.

Unless the state changes its strategic vision, it will not be able to defeat the guerrilla uprising, only contain it. The official discourse is beginning to reflect this reality. The government is content to maintain the current balance, giving up the possibility of a lasting solution to the Colombian conflict. That is, unless the opportunity for fruitful negotiations happens to present itself, an unlikely event.

For their part, the guerrillas seem to be able to survive the government efforts. Today the FARC should feel “victorious on the defensive,” capable of withstanding all that Colombia and the United States send its way. I am hardly shocked that they have begun to present themselves internationally as a refuge for governments in the region that may be subject to an eventual invasion by the U.S.

The FARC is a guerrilla group engaged in a prolonged conflict, and its current resistance is a necessary phase in anticipation of better times. These will come, in their estimation, when they are able to withstand the pressures against them.

Of course, the guerrillas’ offensive activity has, reasonably, fallen off somewhat. Paradoxically, it is the government that has not been able to fulfill its objectives. Despite a rejuvenated military with renewed combat capacity and the retreat of the FARC, the government has been unable to fulfill its plan for a military victory. Thus, it cannot claim victory while the guerrillas have achieved their stated goal of survival. The likelihood of the FARC defeating the state is more remote today than ever, but this is not their objective. Thus, they feel they have won, on the defensive.

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In this environment, those called to negotiations by President Uribe did not see any hope of success. Uribe has not been able to impose his conditions on the negotiations and the FARC have not renounced theirs. The situation is, once again, at an impasse.

To repeat the logic of the first phase of Plan Colombia, the situation will not resolve itself. This, however, is exactly what Uribe has been implying in his most recent statements.

A Political and Military Conflict

Ten years ago, the conflict could have been characterized as a military and political conflict, in that order. During the initial guerrilla period, before the “war of movements,” the political results for the state and its rivals depended on the events on the battlefield. But the conflict has gradually evolved to become primarily political again, as are all guerrilla wars. In this type of conflict, the military results and the solution to the war depend on political success. Winning the hearts of the population is a key factor in that success.

It seems axiomatic to say that no one can win an internal conflict without the support of the population. But the reality lies somewhere between saying this and understanding it. A concrete analysis of the concrete reality is the key element that needs to be exposed.

It is undeniable that President Uribe enjoys enormous public support. His comfortable reelection, with almost two million more votes in 2006 than he got in 2002, demonstrates the public’s confidence in Uribe. His “democratic security” policy is likewise tremendously popular, which helps explain why he won reelection with 62% of the vote. But there are additional factors that need to be considered to understand the limits of this security policy.

First, the aggressive language the president uses toward the guerrillas contaminates

the policy discourse and encourages abuse against the legitimate opposition to his administration. Today, the safety of members of opposition parties like the Polo Democrático is increasingly at risk. During the presidential campaign, Uribe referred to Carlos Gaviria, the candidate from Polo Democrático, as a “communist in disguise,” whose goal was to empower the FARC. Following that declaration, the attitude of the official intelligence community changed and monitoring the Polo Democrático became a main focus of their operations.

Uribe’s hostile language also helps the guerrillas clandestinely recruit university students inclined to radicalism. Thus, there is always an ample supply of new political operatives for the FARC.

Second, and most important, the peasant population, especially in the south of the country where illicit crops are cultivated, has tightened its relationship with the guerrillas.

President Uribe has certainly been very successful in persuading the general population to back his hard-line policy. But he has failed to gain support where it is most needed, in the regions where there is direct conflict between government troops and the FARC.

Many diverse approaches have been used to manage relations with the peasants. The most common over the past 15 years has been the promotion and support of paramilitary groups. The paramilitaries are primarily organized crime groups that combine illegal businesses with some counterinsurgent operations. A few exceptions prove the rule. Only a handful of groups began as counterinsurgents and later became involved in common crime to finance their operations.

The basis of the strategy has been to use terror to neutralize the guerrilla’s lifeblood: popular support. Similar methods have

worked in other countries of the continent. In Colombia, the paramilitary strategy has achieved results in some regions of the country, but not in others.

The strategy worked, in conjunction with military action, where one or more of the following conditions have been present. First, the peasant support for the guerrillas has diminished significantly due to abuses against the public by the insurgents. Second, the geographical conditions were unfavorable to the guerrillas, such as rural plains with sparse vegetation and low population density. Third, the guerrillas lacked military development.

In each of the successful cases, the paramilitaries acted as a population control force rather than an anti-guerrilla force. In certain regions they achieved a very significant level of local support, especially where the guerrillas had lost the peasants' confidence. But in some areas, once the guerrillas were expelled, these paramilitaries lost public support because they abused their power. In a few cases the peasants even began to long for the guerrillas after a while.

The limits of the paramilitary strategy became evident in the zones where the FARC were more established. In the south of the country they used terror to gain a foothold but were unable to consolidate their presence. Furthermore, in some territories the paramilitaries became easy targets for the guerrillas, who supplied themselves with arms and ammunition by attacking and destroying paramilitary camps.

What is certain is that the paramilitary strategy failed to win the war. The state ultimately withdrew its support and the paramilitaries could not survive. They were able to expel the guerrillas from some regions of the country, but they could not achieve success in the regions where the FARC was most entrenched. There are remnants of these groups in various

zones of the country, with the full knowledge and tacit acceptance of the armed forces. They must be completely dislodged in order to win the support of the population.

The government engaged in negotiations with the paramilitary forces and had relative success in demobilizing their members. But they gradually began to lose control of the process. The Supreme Court decided to prosecute several members of congress who were linked with the paramilitaries and the attorney general is expected to expand this investigation and prosecute other public figures for similar crimes. This case could penetrate very deeply into the state structure.

Apparently, President Uribe understands that he cannot stop the process, and he is working on expanding the prosecutions so that the scandal affects political sectors other than his allies, who have been the focus so far. It is not a stretch to assume that this scandal will linger for several months and affect the public support for the President. If Uribe is able to generalize the blame, however, the situation could be much less damaging for him.

The Costs of Fumigation

In previous paragraphs I said that I would discuss the conflation of the war on drugs and the war against the guerrillas. The fundamental theory is that you can effectively combat the guerrilla if you destroy illicit crops. The government argues that each dollar that the guerrillas receive enhances their ability to carry out operations.

One cannot ignore the importance of money in war. Even a relatively inexpensive irregular force that does not receive a salary, such as the FARC, is quite costly to maintain.

No study has been conducted to calculate the minimum number of hectares of coca that would cover the FARC's basic expenses. Nevertheless, preliminary analyses indicate

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that the control of 30,000 hectares of coca cultivation would be sufficient to pay the guerrilla's recurring costs. There are approximately 100,000 hectares of coca in Colombia today, most of which are located in areas of FARC influence. Under these conditions, this organization easily earns sufficient funds to cover its activities.

Plan Colombia was based on the assumption that it was possible to substantially reduce the area of coca cultivation through intensive fumigation. During a discussion I had with a high-ranking official in the National Police in 1998, he claimed that the problem with fumigation was that it was not sufficiently frequent. In other words, farmers could plant and replant the coca crop faster than the armed forces could spray it. So the fumigation was intensified.

The initial results seemed to confirm the government reasoning. As the area of spraying expanded, the areas of coca cultivation diminished, according to satellite images. However, in the year 2005, this trend reversed. More coca was fumigated and manually eradicated that year than ever before in the history of Colombia. The combined total of spraying and manual eradication exceeded 170,000 hectares in 2005, a world record. Rather than continued decreases, the cultivation of coca began to rise again. Once more, the rate of planting and replanting is greater than the rate of eradication.

This leads to the question, what do the farmers do once the coca is eradicated? If there is no new alternative, they simply replant coca.

The fumigation policy has a profound effect on the conflict. In my opinion, the financial resources that the FARC earn from illicit crops have never been put in serious jeopardy. Of course, there need to be more precise studies that establish the revenue that the FARC currently receive from coca and poppy cultivation.

Indiscriminate fumigation pushes the peasant population in the coca-growing regions towards an alliance with the guerrillas. These groups regulate the business, impose order, protect the peasants from criminal gangs, authorize the purchase of coca base, guarantee each party receives what they are due, and, in general, are the accepted authority on the topic for the population.

The poor, rural population has lived for prolonged periods without a state presence and carries out illegal activities such as coca cultivation. Thus, they are more inclined to accept the illegal parallel state created by the insurgents, especially if the state simply treats the people as enemies. As the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

I would go so far as to say that the cultivation of illegal crops is doubly useful for the FARC. On one hand it continues to finance their activities, as they have successfully avoided the effects of fumigation. On the other hand, coca and poppy farmers are treated as enemies of the state, which drives them toward the guerrillas.

I made a visit recently to the Pacific coast at Nariño, a region where the cultivation of illicit crops has grown at a greater rate than any other region in the country over the last several years. This area demonstrates the disastrous effect of the prolonged abandonment of these areas, poor local governance, the presence (until recently) of an especially violent paramilitary group, and, especially, the indiscriminate fumigation of illegal crops. The guerrilla influence has surged to unprecedented levels in the region.

Clearly, a new course is needed.

Winning Rural Support

Colombia has made a great effort in recent years to find a solution to the last guerrilla conflict in Latin America. We need to con-

tinue to search for a solution, taking into account the successes and mistakes of the last few decades. Abandoning the effort would be irresponsible, but it would also be irresponsible to continue without making serious changes.

Allowing the conflict to continue unresolved for the long term, as has happened many times in Colombian history, could reduce the pressure on the guerrillas and allow the FARC to dream of an armed victory. The country would once again return to the vicious cycle that has dominated the history of the Colombian conflict.

The first condition for a negotiated peace—which I believe is the only possible path to peace—is that the parties are certain that a military victory is impossible. If the FARC maintains some hope, however remote, that they could triumph through force, they will never take a viable negotiating position.

For this reason, I believe that serious changes are needed in the security and national defense policy, and quickly. It needs to be realigned to conform with the conflict, which has reverted to classic guerrilla warfare.

The current government strategy is focused primarily on the use of force, which runs financial and political risks. It is not easy to maintain the current level of internal spending during a stalemate. Nor is it easy to maintain public support under these circumstances.

Public support for a strategy like the democratic security policy is not guaranteed once the memories of previous government successes begin to fade. In the year 2000, insecurity was unbearable and a hard-line policy was a priority for Colombia. But now that the conflict has moved to the less-populated regions around the guerrilla headquarters, other issues have captured the attention of voters. The public is increasingly

dissatisfied that social investment has been displaced by security spending.

One could argue that the recent electoral results contradict the previous observation, but the reelection was closely linked to the personality of President Uribe. The campaign in 2010 will be another story because Uribe will not be a candidate and he has no clear successor. Whoever succeeds him, from his own circle or the opposition, will be under significant pressure to modify the budgetary priorities.

That is, of course, unless the government achieves a breakthrough in the conflict. The hope of capturing or killing an important guerrilla commander as a symbol of the success of the democratic security policy seems to fade more and more every day. If it does happen, it would be an incredible stroke of luck for the government.

International actors increasingly have higher priorities than the Colombian conflict. A list is unnecessary in this paper, but Colombia is dropping on their ranking of concerns and international aid is already showing signs of falling off.

In sum, I don't think the current effort is sustainable, physically or politically, if the only result is a continued impasse.

The central objective of the current initiative, the highest priority for state action, should be winning over the hearts of the rural population in the conflict zones.

Earning the confidence of this group is not easy, nor can it be achieved in the short term. The regions where it would be simple have already kicked out the guerrillas and transformed their own situation. The government has based its plans on the belief that the FARC are an occupation force and that the armed forces would be greeted as liberators

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but the ensuing
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after they freed the people from the dictatorship of the guerrillas. This has happened in some areas, but these cases cannot be generalized. One should not forget that the FARC are a political and military force and they have been recovering their political influence in key regions over the last four years. Their move to the defensive while dispersing into smaller groups has brought them back into close contact with the population. There are signs of this renewed connection in Cauca, Nariño, and Putumayo.

In certain regions, such as Caquetá, the FARC is not a group that is loved by the majority of the peasants, my experience has shown. Rather, the force is tolerated, timidly. But the government is held in even lower esteem by the rural population.

The first problem that needs to be addressed is illicit crops. There are two ways to tackle the problem of coca and poppy cultivation.

The first option can be called an “Afghanistan strategy,” involving total tolerance of illicit crops. Because the objectives of fighting the Taliban and the poppy trade were contradictory, the former took priority while the latter was ignored. As a result, the Middle Eastern country filled with opium following the collapse of the Taliban regime, which had greatly reduced the poppy crop during its reign. The choice between fighting political enemies and fighting drugs is much easier since September 11th—terrorism is much more dangerous than heroin. As another paradox of war, today the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban are each, for their own reasons, tolerating or encouraging poppy cultivation.

Such a policy is undesirable in Colombia. Drug trafficking is harmful for Colombia at every point in the chain of production. It not only hurts Colombians and consumers worldwide, but the ensuing corruption and violence continue to batter our society.

The second option is crop substitution or alternative development. This policy is most effective if executed as part of a larger process of rural development.

Alternative development needs to address several questions. The first is whether there are productive crops that can generate revenue similar to coca cultivation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released an interesting analysis of drug financing that indicates that, at least in some regions of Colombia such as the Pacific coast, alternative crops can generate incomes equivalent to growing coca or poppies. But it is necessary to take action, for if there are no alternatives, the situation simply will not change. The problem is not only to eradicate the illegal crops, but to understand and shape what happens immediately after they are removed. Without other possibilities, the people will soon return to coca.

In other regions, such as the Amazon basin, where more than half of coca cultivation takes place, however, no other product can even finance the costs of raising the pH level of the acidic soil to make it suitable for agriculture. In truth, it is almost impossible to raise a profitable crop other than coca in the poor soil of this jungle region.

This conundrum led to the creation of the Forest Guards program under this government. Better to care for the forest than produce illicit crops, the reasoning goes. In a recent visit to Putumayo, peasants confessed to me that many of them receive subsidies and comply with the Forest Guards program in some areas while growing coca elsewhere at the same time. In other words, they receive subsidies with one hand and raise coca with the other. In the end, they have plenty of time for both activities because not growing coca occupies very little time.

The government has been gradually modifying the program while keeping the Forest

Guards name. As I have already noted, however, there are few viable and profitable industries in the Amazon area and the region has more people than it can support. Thus, the government should look into offering a voluntary relocation of the Amazon population, providing them land, credit, technical assistance, and market access in the center of the country, where there is already education, health, sanitary, and transportation infrastructure in place. This option would require a special land reform program, a “rural reform” program, which would encompass much more than just land.

Land is highly concentrated in Colombia, where 3,000 landowners control 24 million hectares. This situation is especially evident in the Caribbean region, in the north of the country, where the paramilitaries are most influential. A viable solution would necessarily hurt the interests of large landowners tied to the paramilitary groups, the leaders of which have gained control of thousands of hectares. Thus, any successful policy requires a powerful political commitment.

The land in rural areas has been highly concentrated throughout Colombian history. This phenomenon led to the displacement of the landless peasants to urban areas and to regions outside of the traditional agricultural zones, where illicit cultivation and guerrilla groups are most likely to be found today.

Carrying out agrarian reform is not an easy task. President López Pumarejo tried in 1936 and was forced to give up. President Lleras Restrepo made another effort in 1968, but his successor, President Misael Pastrana, the father of President Andrés Pastrana, ended the attempt three years later.

Nevertheless, agrarian reform is an unavoidable obligation of Colombia’s development. Framing the effort as part of a solution to the drug problem and the armed conflict would

make it more plausible than it has ever been. However, such a program would require a political will that does not seem to exist in the current government. Uribe is an estateholder and has never shown much passion for land reform.

As it now stands, very few of the 300,000 hectares confiscated by the state, due to disuse or illicit cultivation, have been awarded to the peasants.

It is worthwhile to understand the market dynamics in the regions where the peasant economy has moved toward narcotics. Because they work in the fields as a family unit, peasants have a single, limited resource: their labor. Any alternative development plan must take this into account. If a legal activity does not occupy their working time, the families will use that time to continue to grow coca or poppies.

Thus, the Forest Guards program as initially designed has not prevented the cultivation of illegal drugs in the Amazon or in other regions. The few cases in which funding has been linked to new crops or a renewal of existing crops show a certain measure of success, especially in preventing the expansion of drug cultivation. Such is the case of San José de Albán in the Nariño department. The region is surrounded by poppy fields, but the renovation of coffee plantations using Forest Guards program funds has prevented this area from falling into the narcotics industry.

Microeconomic analyses of the poppy growers of Samaniego, Nariño show that a four-person family earns 1 million pesos (\$230) per month cultivating a half hectare of poppies. Four people can handle the farm work without any outside help. Taking into account that these four family members can earn extra income through outside activities during slower periods of the year, that they earn credit to expand production, and that

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they are paid for their crop in cash, it is very hard to identify an economic alternative to poppy cultivation. Nevertheless, the alternative development program in Samaniego has had some success encouraging the cultivation of winter tomatoes.

One key challenge is to get these alternative development products to the market. One of the advantages of illicit crops is that peasants have guaranteed buyers. Intermediary purchasers willing to bear all the risks of the market will seek out coca or poppy farmers even in the most remote corner of Colombia. This is not the case for most alternative development products, which is one of their greatest weaknesses. The yucca alternative development programs in Putumayo are an example of the difficulty of securing market access.

Peasant economies generally have strong incentives against single-crop farming. The phytosanitary problems created by single-crop farms are often complex and peasants are ill-equipped financially to handle a serious farming crisis. Thus, experiences like the African palm, which gathered large, medium and small producers, should be looked at with interest but caution.

On the Pacific coast, where the cultivation of coca is expanding rapidly, custom-tailored programs are needed. The Afro-Colombian population of this region is culturally very different than the peasants in other areas of the country. For a long time their production was better described as collection than actual agriculture. Illicit crops have shown them the importance of proper agricultural practices, such as the use of fertilizer, the value of spraying against diseases, and how to sell their crops on the market. I would consider them farmers in training. But they also have a much more intense community life than other peasants. Legally, the land is collective

property in these regions and there is currently a process underway to grant titles to Community Councils, the legally recognized forms of popular assembly.

The Pacific region, where the recent wave of fumigation has been most intense, may have better conditions for successful alternative development, partly because illegal crops have been cultivated for less time there. There are already pilot programs in cooperation with Europe, the United Nations, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that merit further exploration and expansion.

Alternative development programs must adapt to the cultural conditions of the communities where they are carried out. Many projects have failed because they were planned out as if all the participants were sophisticated, professional farmers. In addition, extended periods of time are needed before real results are consolidated and become apparent, as the experience of Thailand shows.

Most communities do not have the luxury of being able to experiment with new and promising crops because the fragile budgets of the small-scale producers cannot run the risks associated with innovative technology. Ideally, these producers would use well-known and safe alternative crops, that peasants are already familiar with, diffusing the new practices gradually and naturally through community leaders. The best example of success is the example of one's neighbor. This is how the cultivation of coca and poppy expanded. Middle and large-scale producers—or the state in their absence—should assume the risks of innovation and, most importantly, guarantee market access.

Many peasant communities are not comfortable with the illegality of their poppy and coca crops and if they have support and an

alternative, they will be willing to abandon the business in spite of its financial advantages. The state needs to take advantage of this sentiment.

In many cases, however, economics or the comfort of legal earnings alone will not achieve results. What is necessary is a new design that combines economic incentives with a high risk for those who cultivate illegal drugs. This would help to encourage a return to legal crops. These elements should not be included in the same program, however. Whatever agency promotes alternative development should not defend forceful eradication and, vice versa.

I prefer manual eradication to the use of force, although it is more costly. For one thing, it is not indiscriminate nor is it easily thwarted by nature. For another, it involves a tangible state presence, which gives the people an opportunity to give their input on the next steps in the eradication process. The Achilles' heel of this program is the insecurity of certain regions.

The public perception of the state must be vastly improved in regions where coca and poppy cultivation are already established to make up for the historic absence of a state presence. This can only be achieved through investments in basic services like education, health, water, and sanitation. A version of such a program is taking place now, but only in a limited manner and with scarce resources. The Ministry of Defense won approval from congress for their new "war tax," part of which would go toward new social investment programs. This funding is a step in the right direction, but the money the administration has indicated it will spend on social investment is insufficient.

A substantial improvement in the quality of public administration is also needed. The

role of governors, mayors, and local authorities is undeniably important. For various reasons, city and departmental authorities have not participated actively in the search for a solution to the conflict with the FARC, which needs to change. Programs designed to improve the management ability, execution, and institutional development of local administrations have enjoyed enormous success.

At the same time, it is essential to create programs oriented towards the youth in these conflict zones. They are the young men and women who end up being recruited by illegal groups because they lack opportunities. Such youth programs, including scholarships to cover the cost of education to improve the productivity of their families, need to be established in the 90 most vulnerable towns in the country.

A third topic of concern is the free trade agreement (FTA) that Colombia has negotiated with the United States. In relation to the conflict, the accord carries the risk of reducing the profitable agricultural alternatives in rural Colombia. Especially worrisome is the case of corn, a crop closely linked to the peasant economy in Colombia, which could disappear due to the FTA, as happened in Mexico. The narrowing of productive options for peasants could always drive them to grow illicit crops and join illegal armed groups. Of course, the FTA may expand export options somewhat, but the crops that are most affected by the conflict are also those that are most affected by free trade.

Finally, it is worth noting that the conflict's current political focus does not mean the armed forces should not be involved. Because the conflict is both political and military, the solution must be as well. It would be tempting but misguided to believe that alternative development or social investment alone could resolve the Colombian conflict.

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As a graphic example, swords without plowshares are worthless, but relying on plowshares without swords is naïveté. Today we have swords but lack plowshares. If we don’t want this opportunity for peace to disappear, we must strike a balance between the two, between security and development. We cannot let the effort flag. Instead, the approach to the conflict needs to be completely rethought.

Conclusion

As noted, this paper is primarily an analysis of the conflict between the Colombian state and the FARC. This does not mean that the paramilitaries or negotiations with the ELN are not important. Every effort to eliminate the paramilitaries as a political actor is essential for any policy to win over the peasants. In my estimation, however, the confrontation with the FARC is the key battle in the broader struggle. A resolution with the FARC could be the cornerstone in the construction of a lasting peace in Colombia.

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