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Expanding Roles and Missions in the War on Drugs and Terrorism: El Salvador and Colombia

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THE WAR AGAINST drug trafficking and terrorism in Colombia continues to entice and perplex the United States, but the average Colombian citizen in Bogotá regards the current U.S. administration's commitment to Colombia as tentative and insincere. The last case of sustained U.S. military support to a Latin American government under siege was in El Salvador in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush supported a small, limited war (from a U.S. perspective) while trying to keep U.S. military involvement a secret from the American public and media. Present U.S. policy toward Colombia appears to follow this same disguised, quiet, media-free approach.

In the 1980s, El Salvador became a "line in the sand." The U.S. pledged to defeat Cuban-inspired and supported insurgencies in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. U.S. policy today appears to want to take a similar stance in Colombia. U.S. support to El Salvador included a sustained commitment of military advisers and a security assistance package guaranteeing U.S. support for the long haul. The monetary commitment was hefty- \$6 billion in security assistance over the course of the war.¹ But the U.S. military commitment of "boots on the ground" in El Salvador was even more important: it was a concrete manifestation of U.S. resolve to El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) and the El Salvador government.

If the United States is serious about countering terrorism and drug trafficking in Colombia, it might be worthwhile to dust off El Salvador archives and examine the model used there to create the necessary organization and structure with which to respond. Other military services played important roles during the El Salvador conflict, but 90 percent of the advisory support effort came from the U.S. Army. Therefore, the Army should be the focal point of any advisory effort brought to bear in Colombia.

The El Salvador Model

United States support to El Salvador began in 1981. Three mobile training teams (MTTs) of military advisers provided infantry, artillery, and military intelligence instruction.² Service support advisers on 1-year tours augmented these limited-duration (3- month) MTTs. Typical service branches were infantry, Special Forces (SF), and military intelligence officers, usually majors, captains, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), or warrant officers with linguistic capabilities. Some were Latin American foreign area officers, and most SF personnel had served exclusively in Latin America.

U.S. military advisers populated the entire ESAF from joint headquarters to brigades. Two officers (operations and intelligence) were assigned to each of the six ESAF infantry brigade headquarters in six geographical areas of the country. Personnel were also assigned to the ESAF artillery headquarters, the logistics center, and the national training center. Their mission was to support their Salvadoran counterparts in establishing training programs and to assist in the military decisionmaking process and in staff and operational matters. In San Salvador, El Salvador's capital, U.S. Army combat and combat support majors and lieutenant colonels supported key ESAF joint staff elements while quietly and discreetly prosecuting the war operationally and with intelligence.

As early as 1983, the Salvadoran military intelligence effort received-

- Target folder packages from the Central American Joint Intelligence Team of the Defense Intelligence Agency.
- Aerial platform intelligence support from Howard Air Force Base in Panama and Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras.
- All-source intelligence analysis from the U.S. Southern Command J2 through its liaison officer at the U.S. Embassy.
- Intelligence from an advisory team assigned to the Salvadoran J2.³

These elements worked in harmony to produce actionable intelligence from within and outside El Salvador in direct

support of the ESAF.

Reagan and Bush pulled out all the stops when it came to ESAF unit and collective training. Entire Salvadoran immediate reaction infantry battalions went to Fort Benning, Georgia, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for advanced infantry training. Another battalion trained at the U.S. and Honduran training facility in Puerto Castillo/Trujillo, Honduras, until a training center was established at La Union, El Salvador. Also, SF personnel trained ESAF infantry battalions and brigades in country. Many Salvadoran officers and NCOs went to the former School of the Americas (now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) at Fort Benning to learn the basics of warfighting-from U.S. Army staff planning doctrine to infantry tactics.

The U.S. Army sought to improve ESAF professionalism by emphasizing the importance of an NCO corps. As an experiment, cadets from El Salvador's military academy were assigned to platoon leader or sergeant positions in their last 2 years of school so they could apply leadership skills in the field. Those who survived became officers with degrees and 2 years of combat experience. They eventually became the colonels and generals of El Salvador's postpeace-process military. This full-court press from a committed U.S. administration produced rapid improvement of the ESAF's combat capabilities and effectiveness.

The Commander, U.S. Military Group (USMILGP), San Salvador, assisted by a deputy commander, operations officer, and U.S. Army section chief, managed the robust security assistance program and supervised the military advisers assigned to the USMILGP and the American Embassy. The USMILGP operations officer and senior U.S. operations adviser coordinated the military advisers' day-to-day activities. Lieutenant colonels assigned to the Salvadoran Joint Command Headquarters and who worked with their ESAF counterparts assisted the USMILGP as needed.

To ensure that the U.S. Army did not exceed its in-country advisory force structure, the U.S. Congress placed a 55-man cap on U.S. personnel permanently assigned to the program. The cap did not include temporary duty (TDY) personnel. At times as many as 250 U.S. service members, most of them on TDY, responded to legitimate host-nation requests for support that permanent personnel could not provide (medical, mine detection, or antiterrorist training support). This small support package sustained the war effort from 1981 until the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadoran government signed peace accords in December 1992.

Assessing the Model

U.S. military advisory programs in El Salvador received mixed reviews.⁴ But if "success has a hundred fathers and failure is an orphan," the Salvadoran advisory model has been generally touted a success. The U.S. military effort helped create a more combat-effective ESAF. U.S. military assistance vastly improved the ESAF's ability to use its equipment and perform combat operations and clearly contributed to putting an improved Salvadoran military on the battlefield. ESAF combat and civic action performance improved enough to undercut FMLN combat capabilities and popular support.⁵

The advisory effort also helped create an environment that promoted success at national and strategic levels. As noted in 1993, the ESAF's new professionalism and the dramatic improvement of its human rights record "affected how the populace, the international community, and even the FMLN ultimately viewed changes in Salvadoran political conditions [and] served to legitimize the gains made by the Salvadoran government in its creation of a climate in which the political left could voice opposition without fear of military reprisals or death squad murders."⁶

U.S. military advice and assistance also helped create a secure environment in rural areas. U.S. Army advisers trained peasants in basic marksmanship then united them with the police and the military in local self-defense units. These self-defense forces kept insurgents from harassing small towns, provided security, and became instruments of a democratic government. They were well-received and remained in place from the late 1980s until the early 1990s.

Human rights benefited most from the U.S. Army advisers' presence. Required to report any human rights violations to the American Embassy, U.S. Army advisers paid close attention to field reports emanating from ESAF combat units. As a result, atrocities or abuse during ESAF military operations did not reach the levels of violations in Guatemala. Guatemala's army, which was not supported by a U.S. Army advisory program, has been accused of committing atrocities. ESAF personnel suspected of atrocities had to answer any charges levied by the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador.

U.S. Army advisers were not allowed to accompany Salvadoran units on combat operations to verify reports of atrocities. Much could have been gained from doing so, but not doing so kept U.S. military and civilian casualties to only 20 during 10 years of conflict. In future conflicts, the Army must make a cost-benefit analysis to weigh the policy's pros and cons.

Despite positive indicators of the military advisory program's benefits, a debate continues as to whether the war ended as a direct result of the program or as a consequence of the negotiated settlement between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government. What is certain is that the ESAF's improvement on the battlefield (and on the front pages of newspapers) put the Salvadoran government in a stronger negotiating position at the peace talks. The military advisory program deserves at least some of the credit for this.

The Colombian Conflict

Placing an El Salvadoran template over Colombia presents challenges, chief among which is Colombia's geographical size. Colombia is the size of Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico combined. El Salvador is only as big as Massachusetts and fits easily into southern Colombia's Cauca and Putumayo departments. The towering, snowcapped Andes Mountains bisect Colombia from north to south, and a dense jungle in the south competes with the Amazon's rain forest. Rivers crisscross southern Colombia and swamps make movement of military units difficult or next to impossible.

Another difference between Colombia and El Salvador is the nature of the Colombian insurgency. The National Liberation Army and Colombian United Self Defense Forces are at war with Colombian government forces, but the tenacious, 15,000-man strong Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), which has fought the Colombian government since the 1960s, overshadows them. FARC has evolved from a classic guerrilla group to a terrorist and drug-trafficking organization. This is significant because with substantial drug-financed resources, FARC is better equipped and supplied than El Salvador's FMLN was. FARC can purchase state-of-the-art communications equipment, weapons, and ammunition through international black markets and even keep its members in new uniforms and boots.

FARC's lucrative drug business almost puts it into the category of a drug cartel or illegal corporate enterprise with its own CEO, middle-management executives, sales and distribution infrastructure, and security force. Today's FARC is a mafia with well-established connections in the drug underworld supported by a large army of hit men as ruthless as any Los Angeles, California, gang. Terrorists in the classic sense, FARC insurgents target civilians, kidnap prominent members of the establishment, and murder people in cold blood to maintain millions in drug revenues and to provide a more-than-comfortable lifestyle for their leaders.

FARC's tentacles extend beyond Colombia to influence every aspect of drug production, transport, and delivery throughout Latin America. It is no exaggeration to say that all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have a permanent FARC presence or that FARC influences them in one way or another.⁷ The 40-year-old insurgent organization has roots deeply embedded in the political, social, and economic fiber of Colombia, is ubiquitous, and foments anarchy. FARC finances, arms, trains, and equips radical groups and inspires them to take violent action against elected governments. FARC insurgents monitor all aspects of their huge drug empire and aim to create a narco-superstate in the southern hemisphere.

FARC thrives on chaos. The more chaos it creates, the more easily it can produce and transport drugs. FARC uses drug money to buy the services of Latin American politicians, judges, ministers, police chiefs, and armed forces commanders. The social consequences of drug addiction in Los Angeles or Miami are minor compared to the consequences of allowing FARC to destroy political freedom, law and order, and civilization in Colombia.

One of the great challenges of the war is how to dismantle FARC. How does the military take on a mafia? Would the U.S. Army be capable of taking on the Chicago or New York mafia? If it did, where would it apply combat force? While it is not an impossible task, it is certainly a formidable one.

A professional army's job is to win its nation's wars. In Colombia and neighboring countries, "winning" the war on drugs can only be measured by sporadic battlefield victories resulting in guerrilla casualties, the successful chemical spraying of coca fields, or the seizure of large drug shipments. The ultimate military victory would be FARC's destruction, the dismantling of its entire coca drug network, and the end of the war on drugs in the United States. These will be achieved only when Colombia, neighboring Latin American states, and the United States are totally committed to defeating drug traffickers. The job is simply too large for the Colombian military alone.

In El Salvador, FMLN chose to negotiate for peace. The government and FMLN negotiators decided to end the war for the sake of creating a future for their beleaguered country, and a negotiated settlement to the war led to the signing of peace accords. But FARC has no allegiance to Colombia. It is a criminal organization that does not desire a future for Colombia other than as a territory for business operations. As a Salvadoran government official told us, "Negotiations always serve a beneficial purpose, but in the case of Colombia, you cannot negotiate with organized crime."⁸

Taking on FARC militarily is not a question of winning, but of keeping FARC from winning. The ESAF is fighting to preserve Colombia's political, economic, and social infrastructure and to maintain security for its citizens. If the Colombian military does not take the battle to FARC, FARC will completely dominate rural Colombia and major urban population centers.

The Colombian government has prudently combined its military and national police operations. Because drug trafficking and terrorism are criminal activities, the government has put the national police in charge, with the Colombian military in a supporting role. This strategy and the use of village defense forces combined make a good recipe for success, one that keeps the government on a higher moral ground.

The Colombian military is in combat against the FARC cartel's military arm, all other FARC combatants, and associated

field drug producing and refining operations. The Colombian military can put pressure on FARC's leadership by killing as many of its members as it can, blocking supply corridors, and destroying drug-producing and processing areas, but the war will only end when attrition depletes FARC's ranks and it loses the will to fight. There can be no final victory until all Latin American countries put pressure on FARC transit routes, and the United States and Europe's insatiable demand for drugs subsides. The Colombian military can and must take the battle to FARC, and U.S. Army advisers can play a significant role in this war. The U.S. Army can make considerable contributions to improve all aspects of the art of warfare through the advisory program. This is where the El Salvador model comes in.

Exporting the El Salvador Model

To apply the El Salvador model in Colombia, the United States must include U.S. Army advisers at the military joint command level within the Colombian military and, perhaps, even to Colombia's police forces. The Colombian military's equivalent to the U.S. joint staff (Jstaff) is the department staff (D-staff). Placing U.S. Army combat, combat support, and combat service support colonels or lieutenant colonels in the D1 through D5 staff sections will ensure support to personnel and logistics matters as well as to operations and intelligence matters. Assigned to the USMILGP on a 1- year unaccompanied or 2- year accompanied basis, these officers would have additional duties to the USMILGP commander as subject matter experts and would form the nucleus and would form the nucleus of an ad hoc advisory task force headquarters. This U.S. Military Advisory Task Force-Colombia (USMATFC) headquarters would manage the day-to-day advisory operations for the USMILGP commander.

Placing military advisers with the rank of major or lieutenant colonel at the Colombian Army's general headquarters is the next step. The ejército, or army, staff (E-staff) is equivalent to the U.S. general staff (G-staff). The U.S. Army should assign officers who are fluent in Spanish to support ejército staff sections. Like D-staff advisers, the officers would assist in manning the USMATFC headquarters.

The United States should also create a military intelligence analytical advisory effort for Colombia's joint and army intelligence centers by assigning two to three U.S. service members at each level. Intelligence personnel (captains, lieutenants, warrant officers, or senior NCOs) should thoroughly understand how to develop collection plans; integrate intelligence preparation of the battlefield; and thoroughly employ all-source analysis, particularly the fusion of signals, imagery, and human intelligence. An effective military intelligence advisory effort should have experienced personnel with multiple tactical unit tours, combat experience, and even extensive training center rotational experience. Obviously, Spanish-language expertise remains key.

With this structure in place, advisers could flow down to the 6 Colombian army combat divisions and approximately 20 brigades, with one operations adviser (combat arms or SF captain or major) and one military intelligence adviser (captain or major) assigned to each combat division and subordinate brigade headquarters. Such assignments would take personnel outside of Bogotá into rural areas, so they would serve unaccompanied 1-year tours. A nationwide VHF radio net using multiple repeaters, a SATCOM UHF radio system, or cellular phones would link the advisers. Advisers could be placed at selected locations such as military schools or regional training centers.

If not enough U.S. Army personnel are available to man all divisions or brigades, the priority of effort should be to the geographic areas or units that will benefit the most from an advisory presence. This flexible, rotational approach toward manning could fill one-third, two-thirds, or all of the Colombian army's infantry divisions and brigades with advisers as the mission dictated. This approach follows the current U.S. approach in support of Plan Colombia, which Colombia developed as an integrated strategy to meet the most pressing challenges it must confront.⁹ As in El Salvador, the advisory program should use specialized MTTs, particularly SF personnel, to provide tactical training to Colombian soldiers.

The U.S. military advisory program in Colombia should be more joint and interagency in nature than it was in El Salvador. U.S. Air Force, Navy (USN), and Marine Corps (USMC) personnel should provide advice from the service headquarters level down to specific locations and units. The National Security Agency, Drug Enforcement Agency, and Central Intelligence Agency can also play significant roles. This joint, interagency approach would be of considerable benefit to the Colombian military.

In the Colombian departments of Caqueta, Putumayo, and Amazonas, USMC and USN advisers could help in riverine warfare operations. The area is similar to the Mekong Delta region of the Republic of Vietnam, and the extensive river networks that crisscross the area are main FARC logistics and drug-trafficking routes. Because the absence of adequate pick-up and landing zones limits helicopter air assault operations' effectiveness, the best way to interdict FARC movements is to attack river transportation. A standing naval infantry advisory presence would enhance the Colombian Navy.

In El Salvador U.S. military advisers were prohibited from accompanying their Salvadoran counterparts on combat operations—even though on some occasions, U.S. military advisers broke the rules and did just that. These occurrences were the exception and not the rule, and the USMILGP command did not endorse them. However, by not participating in field operations, U.S. advisers had difficulty establishing their reputations and remaining a viable part of operations. To enhance U.S. advisers' influence and professional standing with their Colombian counterparts, U.S. advisers should accompany their host-nation counterparts when they take the field.

Even limited deployments would probably result in U.S. advisers being killed or wounded in action in numbers greater than those killed or wounded in El Salvador. Nonetheless, U.S. advisers would certainly be more effective, viable, and responsive, and Colombians might regard anything less than adviser participation in combat operations as a less-than-firm U.S. commitment to the war against drug trafficking and terrorism.

Showing U.S. Resolve

The advisory program functioned reasonably well throughout the Salvadoran conflict, fulfilled its intent, and directly affected the war's outcome. U.S. military personnel-

- Were present at all major combat unit headquarters.
- Assisted in unit operations planning.
- Provided tactical intelligence analysis.
- Developed individual and unit training programs.
- Acted as subject matter experts in support of ESAF commanders and staffs.

The U.S. ambassador or the USMILGP commander could count on trained professional U.S. military personnel to observe and report on events in the war zone.

In El Salvador, the physical presence of U.S. military personnel was proof of a firm U.S. commitment to support a besieged government. Salvadoran soldiers saw the evidence of the U.S. commitment when America's fighting men stood beside them. No other type of security assistance could have replaced this concrete example of U.S. resolve. Colombian soldiers will feel the same way. A former Colombian army commander responsible for Plan Colombia counterdrug and combat operations said, "Your [U.S. military advisers'] presence is yet another indicator of your support. Your presence and support are indicators of your confidence in our operations. Your physical presence here-eating and sleeping, and sharing the war effort-demonstrates your trust in our ability to protect the force, as we prosecute the mission."¹⁰

A robust U.S. military advisory program might not bring the Colombian war to a negotiated settlement as it did in El Salvador, nor will it ensure an ultimate military victory for the Colombian military; however, it can buy time to achieve victory by preventing the destruction of Colombia's political, economic, and social infrastructure by an armed, well-organized criminal group. If this safeguards U.S. national interests in Latin America, then the mission is worth executing.

NOTES

1. Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), 2.
2. Victor M. Rosello, Peter Diaz, and Victor J. Castrillo, "US Military Intelligence and Electronic Warfare Support to the Salvadoran Conflict: A Brief History," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement* (Summer 1994): 74.
3. *Ibid.*, 70.
4. A.J. Bacevich, James D. Hallums, Richard H. White, and Thomas F. Young, *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988).
5. Rosello, "Lessons from El Salvador," *Parameters* (Winter 1993-94): 104.
6. *Ibid.*
7. The authors obtained the views expressed through their discussions with Latin American military counterparts. The perspective on the regional threat from FARC and its foreign liaisons is in direct contrast to the view that the Latin American area is a safe, benign environment posing no immediate threat to the United States and its national interests.
8. David Escobar Gallindo, interview with the authors, San Salvador, El Salvador, 20 June 2002. Gallindo served as a representative for the Salvadoran government during the negotiations leading to a peace accord from 1991 to 1992.
9. Plan Colombia's objectives are to promote the peace process, combat the narcotics industry, revive the Colombian economy, and strengthen the democratic pillars of Colombian society. For more information, see on-line at <www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2001/1042.htm>, accessed 25 February 2004.
10. MG Mario Montoya Uribe, Colombian Army, former Commander, JTF South, interview with the authors, Tres Esquinas, Caqueta Department, Colombia, July 2001.

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<http://www.leavenworth.army.mil/milrev/English/MarApr04/valenzuela.pdf>