

Memorandum – Background Analysis:
The role of narcotics trafficking in the Colombian conflict

Memorandum prepared by
Benedikt Wahler

Prepared for the Research Seminar “War in the Modern World”
by Professor Eliot A. Cohen, PhD

March 9, 2005

The Johns Hopkins University
The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)
Washington, DC

Memorandum

To: Professor Eliot Cohen

Date: 9 March 2005

From:

Subject: Role of narcotics trafficking in the Colombian conflict

1. Drugs loom large over Colombia's economy, politics and security: in the 1990s it had become the world's leading producer of coca and cocaine, as well as the Americas' major producer of heroin and marijuana. The economic power drugs offer totals around a billion USD per year, providing immense capacity to corrupt, and build state-challenging structures. This is relevant if the conflict situation in Colombia is considered, as this analysis does, as a multi-pronged onslaught on state authority. For illegal narcotics activities have become a common denominator of actors as different as organized crime, left-wing guerilla, right-wing paramilitaries and rural self-defense groups.
2. Motives for the alliance of armed groups and narcotics are to be found in the potential for a strategic symbiosis: generation and allocation of economic resources, political and military control over territory and people, arms-secured freedom of movement and action, and a politically-framed claim to legitimacy. Their effective combination results in a formidable quasi-state, while otherwise insurgents or paramilitaries, and drugs traffickers separately would lack some key elements. Most basically, insurgents and paramilitaries require logistical and communications support and money in exchange for which traffickers seek followers, organization, and discipline for protection. Already from a geographical point of view, illegal drug-trafficking and insurgent activity overlap in benefiting from the same rough and fragmented terrain of Colombia's mountains and jungle plains.
3. A particular opportunity for cooperation came about as the break-up of the Cali and Medellín cartels in the mid-1990s fragmented control over the narcotics trade. Guerilla and paramilitary groups could switch from mere taxers and protectors of the trade to asserting direct control over it. The new decentralized structures of narcotics exist next to and partially under the armed groups.
4. Notable differences exist in the relative importance of drug-related income to the various armed groups. While their overall income splits in about 50% drug-money, 30% extortion and 20% kidnapping, the last two are relatively more important as a source of financing for the guerillas FARC and especially ELN while the mainstay of the paramilitary groups clearly is the drug business. This is due to their traditional personal and ideological proximity to narcotics smugglers.
5. Linkages between narcotics and non-state actors are most evident for organizations that are direct spin-offs of the drug trade and style themselves as self-defense forces. The paramilitary *Death to Kidnappers* (MAS), for instance was a part of the Medellín Cartel's protection. The Peasant Self-Defense Force of Cordoba and Uraba (ACCU), is said to have had links to crime since its beginning, and its founder Carlos Castaño later formed and led the paramilitary confederation AUC.
5. Aggressively financed by proceeds from drugs, AUC has come to eclipse or bring together formerly legal neighborhood self-defense units under the predominant drug-related paramilitaries. The latter, backed by drug cartel bosses and rich cattle ranchers, pursue a more clearly political-military strategy that is remotely similar of the tactics used by the NSDAP in Germany's 1920s and 30s: engage in urban attacks and armed political struggle with its SA battalions creating open violence while posturing as a promoter of "law and order" on the political agenda.
6. The Communist FARC has its origin as one of many armed groups of political factions in the years of civil strife of *la violencia* (1948-64), and pursues a insurgency strategy on the Chinese/Vietnamese model. Their political agenda and terror failed to gain a mass following. Drugs became increasingly relevant after FARC when gaining control over Caquetá and Meta departments in the 1980s, Colombia's main coca-growing regions. A motivation for seeking control of narcotics activities were its financial opportunities as well as dependence of agricultural migrants, whom FARC considered their "social base", on drug cultivation. Illicit funding permitted massively expanding to 18,000-20,000 fighters in 2001 by buying allegiance, and make the strategic step from the concealed hit-and-run phase (*equilibrium*) to the *counteroffensive* phase of more open combat.

7. A counter-example for the force of narcotics is the National Liberation Army (ELN). Targeting mainly Colombia's oil industry, and renouncing involvement in narcotics under its leader Father Pérez, ELN remained militarily and politically weak and ineffectual. After Pérez' death 'pragmatists' are arguing to look increasingly to drugs to diversify and strengthen ELN financing.
8. In the case of FARC and AUC, massive inflow of money allows more complex and powerful organizational structures and permitted extensive patronage to build loyalty. Drug cultivation and trade has materially and politically strengthened the armed groups: economic opportunities related to drugs have attracted large numbers of migrants to formerly sparsely-populated areas under guerilla and paramilitary control as "willing subjects". In brief: while in all cases military control over territory provided the growth medium for non-state actors, drug-related money was one (and potentially decisive) catalyst for their mushrooming. Lack or usurpation of state control and financial power from illegal activities were jointly necessary to bring about the current comprehensive power of armed groups in a self-reinforcing process that undermines state authority.
9. Drug traffickers, guerillas and paramilitaries are all non-state actors who have a common objective in weakening state control in order to allow them to thrive. Yet, strong independent narco-groups such as the cartels may have had a separate interest in using their financial leverage to usurp traditional political machines and state structures, permitting more wide-ranging control than that via any paramilitary group, e.g. as under president Ernesto Samper (1994-98), bankrolled by Cali.
10. Involvement in crime, supposedly to finance political objectives of the armed groups, is likely to create its own momentum that prolongs the conflict. Crime provides a non-political incentive to the groups acting independent of and against the government, rendering conflict less likely to be resolved by political negotiations, reconciliation processes or power-sharing agreements. For control over a territory now provides economic benefits that would not accrue to the same extent in a legal environment. A reintegration under government authority would extinguish the immense economic benefits that illegal activity brings. Crime and its payoff effaces the original political or socio-economic motivation of the armed movement, effectively becoming the "profession" of the rebels. It has the potential to turn from instrumental to an political-military end to an end in itself. The prevalence of criminal activity over 'political-military' actions in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country, suggests that this has already happened to IRA and ETA, as it may in Colombia.
11. Cases, where drug cultivation, refining and trafficking are involved may undermine prospects for a political settlement even more than those where the economic backing of conflict parties is derived from extractive activity (e.g. diamonds or gold mining) as in many African conflicts. For in such a scenario, most resource extraction (with the potential exception of illegal logging) could be continued under a government that shares power and revenue of the entire national territory between the parties to the conflict. This is not the case with the illegal empires of narcotics.
12. The huge economic power derived from narcotics, further complicates the assertion of state authority, in that its potential to corrupt the military undermines civilian rule. In Colombia, collusion between drug-related paramilitaries and the military seem to have already turned the armed forces into a more independent actor that opposes civilian attempts to proceed against AUC. Frequent recruitment of former high military officers and NCO's by AUC, and their dissatisfaction with attempts at negotiated settlements endanger a civilian security agenda. President Uribe's relative leniency towards AUC combined with a firm military approach to the guerillas appears to reflect a pragmatic recognition to proceed gradually and cautiously in reasserting civilian control.
13. Any challenge to state authority may have a 'tipping point' from where on the momentum works decisively against the state. The combination of narcotics-generated finance and armed non-state actors may present the most formidable challenge so far to state authority. For while it may not reflect an actual underlying grievance, it may be able to get around the strenuous creation of a mass following by buying an equivalent material and personnel with the massive funds at its disposal. US concentration only on the narcotics side is therefore dangerously myopic. Looking from the outside in, it is unclear where exactly Colombia stands today: is the state still resisting in any effective way or has it given way to a mere façade of state structures behind which other actors pull the strings?