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Is Plan Colombia a Model? An Analysis of Counternarcotics Strategies in Colombia¹

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Abstract

This article examines Plan Colombia, which began as a counternarcotics program in 2000. The U.S. has allocated more than \$8 billion to the country via Plan Colombia from 2000 to 2012. The article examines some of the successes of Plan Colombia. Some experts and policymakers have touted Plan Colombia as a model for other countries facing problems with drug trafficking, organized crime, and insurgency. This work focuses on the lessons learned from Plan Colombia and provides a critical perspective of the concept of models

Drug trafficking and organized crime continue to be important issues on the U.S. security agenda. Colombia has been at the epicenter of the U.S.-led war on drugs for decades. Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) traveled to Washington, D.C. on February 4, 2016 to visit President Barack Obama and celebrate 15 years of Plan Colombia, which began as a counternarcotics plan.² Juan Carlos Pinzón, Colombia's ambassador to the United States, has also been promoting strengthening cooperation between the U.S. and Colombia. Plan Colombia has been touted as a model for other countries suffering as a result of drug trafficking and organized crime as well as insurgency movements. This article is an effort to analyze the concept of Plan Colombia as a model for other countries, particularly after the U.S. has provided Colombia with \$10 billion in assistance over the past 15 years.³

Historical Background

By the end of the 1990s, Colombia faced major economic challenges as well as high levels of insecurity in the country. Colombia is a complex country because in addition to drug traffickers the country has had more than 50 years of internal armed conflict as various guerrilla organizations exist in Colombia.

The largest guerrilla organization is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—FARC). The FARC participate in various illicit activities such as drug trafficking, organized crime, extortion, and kidnapping. President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) sought support from the U.S. to prevent the situation in Colombia from worsening. Pastrana desired to end the internal armed conflict and focus first on peace and developmental issues and then drug trafficking and organized crime. The Clinton administration changed the initial plan, focusing more on drug trafficking and organized crime as it did not want to draw the U.S. into Colombia's internal armed conflict. While President Pastrana envisioned a plan financed by the international community, European governments did not agree with the reversal of the formula by the Clinton administration. As a result, Plan Colombia was financed solely by the U.S. In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed Plan Colombia and the Clinton administration signed it into law.⁴ Plan Colombia focused on "hard" components such as strengthening the military and combating coca cultivation as opposed to alternative development. The original goal of Plan Colombia was to reduce drug cultivation, processing, and trafficking by 50 percent in the first six years of the initiative.⁵ According to Adam Isacson, from 2000 to 2016, 71 percent of the financial resources went towards the police and military assistance, while only 29 percent went towards institutional and economic assistance.⁶

Shifts in the Goals of Plan Colombia

The goals of Plan Colombia evolved over time. The events of September 11, 2001 altered U.S. foreign policy as the Bush administration launched a global war on terror. President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) recognized that he had to change the perceptions of the Colombian conflict in order to fit within the broader foreign policy goals of the U.S. President Uribe argued that Colombia did not have an internal armed conflict but rather terrorists. He contended that the FARC in Colombia are narco-terrorists or narco-guerrillas. President Bush bought into the re-orientation of Plan Colombia and provided the Uribe administration with the financial support necessary. The Bush administration supported Colombia in its fight against the narco-terrorists for several reasons. First, Colombia has historically been a key ally of the U.S. Second, the Bush administration received criticism that it was at war against the Muslim world. Supporting the Colombian government enabled President Bush

to demonstrate that it helped governments combat terrorism around the globe, regardless of religion or geographic region. Third, Colombia is located in an important position and an unstable Colombia could impact U.S. security as well as regional security.⁷

The FARC concerned the Uribe administration as this guerrilla group dominated large parts of rural Colombia. Uribe sought to combat this guerrilla organization and prevent them from expanding. In the early 2000s, there were discussions among experts about Colombia being on the brink of becoming a failed state.⁸ Support from the U.S. enabled the Colombian government to modernize and professionalize the Colombian Army. As a result, the Uribe administration dealt crushing blows to the FARC, which was in part due to the military training and support that the U.S. government provided the Colombian military. By 2000, the FARC had approximately 20,000 members.⁹ The number of FARC members decreased to 8,000 in 2010 from 16,000 in 2002.¹⁰

Plan Colombia had “partial victories,”¹¹ as security levels improved over time and the state’s control of the country’s territory increased. In 2005, Colombia had 801 recorded kidnappings. The number of kidnappings decreased from 523 in 2007 to 213 in 2009.¹² In 2014, Colombia recorded 288 kidnappings. In addition to decreases in the number of kidnappings, Colombia also witnessed a decline in homicides. In 2005, for example, Colombia had a national homicide rate of 42.2 per 100,000 inhabitants. By 2014, the homicide rate decreased to 28.0 per 100,000.¹³ In sum, Colombia saw increases in security according to various metrics.¹⁴

Plan Colombia, however, was less successful in terms of reducing drug trafficking and organized crime. Aerial eradication has been a major element of Plan Colombia. The spraying of herbicides has had environmental and health consequences. In addition to the negative ramifications of aerial spraying programs, such efforts have not been effective as coca cultivation has simply shifted between departments of Colombia and to other countries in the Andes. In December 2007, Colombia cultivated 98,899 hectares of coca. The number of hectares declined to 63,762 and 47,790 in December 2011 and December 2012, respectively.¹⁵ Peru became the leading coca cultivating country in the world in 2013.¹⁶ In 2015, Colombia regained its status as the leading coca cultivator in the world.¹⁷

In addition to being the number one coca cultivating country, cocaine production has continued in Colombia. In 2008, Colombia’s potential manufacturing capability of cocaine was 450 tons. While the manufacturing of cocaine declined slightly over the years, cocaine production has remained high: 410 tons in 2009; 350 tons in 2010; 345 tons in 2011; and 309 tons in 2012.¹⁸ The results of the partial successes of Plan Colombia are that drug routes have shifted to other countries like Mexico.¹⁹ However, routes are returning to Colombia. Thus, despite these partial victories,²⁰ the overall situation has not changed as drugs remain purer, cheaper, and more readily available than when the U.S. launched the war on drugs in 1971.²¹

Plan Mexico and the Concept of a Model

As a result of the successes, Plan Colombia has been promoted as a model for other countries suffering from organized crime, drug trafficking, and guerilla groups. Mexican President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) sought support from the U.S. to combat drug trafficking organizations. The Bush administration supported the Mexican government with a Plan Mexico. The name of the Plan eventually changed to the Mérida Initiative in order to disassociate it from Plan Colombia.²² While there are differences between the Mérida Initiative and Plan Colombia, the overall strategies have similarities. Both initiatives have focused on “hard” components and combating drug trafficking and organized crime, particularly by using the military. Calderón militarized the drug war in Mexico in part because he did not have high levels of confidence in the police as a result of the high levels of corruption.²³ The result has been extreme levels of violence. During the Calderón presidency, 70,000 people died as a result of drug-related violence and another 26,000 disappeared.²⁴ The goals of the Mérida Initiative have been altered under the Obama administration as efforts have been made to focus more on the rule of law and strengthening institutions. Despite this shift, Mérida Initiative funding levels have been lower than Plan Colombia: \$143 million in FY 2011 to \$194.2 million in FY 2014.²⁵

There have also been talks about a Plan Colombia for Central America,²⁶ particularly since this region has become extremely violent in large part due to drug trafficking and organized crime. In 2012, Honduras recorded 85.5 homicides per 100,000 people, making it the most violent non-warring country in the world.²⁷ In 2015, El Salvador surpassed Honduras as the most violent non-warring country.²⁸ Retired

Admiral James Stavridis, who led the U.S. Southern Command in Miami from 2006–2009,²⁹ advocated for a Plan Colombia for Central America. He argues, “We need a ‘Plan Central America,’ much as we had a ‘Plan Colombia,’ and now is the time to explore what that should look like.”³⁰ Yet some experts have questioned a Plan Colombia for Central America. Michael Lohmuller contends, “Ultimately, while it is right to appeal for increased US attention to a region plagued by violence and crime, Central America is not Colombia. Policymakers must therefore be cautious about using Plan Colombia as a road map for action in the region, and should avoid indiscriminately taking its lessons as gospel.”³¹

Plan Colombia has not only been advocated as a model for countries in Latin America but other countries around the world. It has been argued that Afghanistan could learn from the lessons of Plan Colombia.³² General Peter Pace, for instance, maintains that “the model that is present here in Colombia where the Armed Forces of the country have rid certain areas of terrorists and then, very importantly, the government has followed with projects that have brought electricity and water and jobs.”³³ Despite the occupation of the country by U.S. troops for more than a decade, Afghanistan remains the leading producer of opium poppy, which is the key ingredient for heroin. In 2012, Afghanistan produced 95 percent of the opium world-wide.³⁴

Such discussions are despite the fact that many critics have argued that Plan Colombia has not been successful on the drug front. Plan Colombia has focused on supply-side strategies as opposed to addressing various underlying issues. Plan Colombia was originally designed as a counternarcotics program, and the results have been underwhelming. The problem with supply-side strategies is that they fail to address the demand for drugs. The logic is that criminal organizations and guerilla groups will continue to traffic drugs—and other illicit commodities—as long as a market exists.

Another issue with Plan Colombia has been the failure to address other important problems. Plan Colombia focused the bulk of the resources on strengthening the military and combating the guerrilla organizations as well as drug trafficking. However, this Plan did not provide sufficient funding to combat corruption and impunity. Colombia—as well as Mexico and Central American countries—has very high levels of corruption and impunity. The military components of

Plan Colombia do not help strengthen weak institutions within Colombia. More resources could be allocated to helping the Colombian government—and other governments—reform its institutions. Major institutional reforms are needed in Colombia—and other countries—in order to consolidate democracy.

Strengthening institutions will help combat the number of human rights abuses that have occurred in countries like Colombia and Mexico.³⁵ In 2008, there were over 800,000 individuals who had been victimized in Colombia, demonstrating that human rights abuses continue to be a serious issue.³⁶ Certain groups have been vulnerable, particularly various indigenous communities and Afro-Colombians. Colombia has seen more than 5.7 million people who have been internally displaced since June 2014.³⁷ Colombian soldiers have also been involved in what is known as the false positives scandal where they killed civilians and dressed them in FARC uniforms in order to receive rewards. José Miguel Vivanco claims that “[f]alse positive killings amount to one of the worst episodes of mass atrocity in the Western Hemisphere in recent years, and there is mounting evidence that many senior army officers bear responsibility.”³⁸ While Plan Colombia is not responsible for all human rights abuses in Colombia as the country has an internal armed conflict, the argument is that the militarization of the strategy has contributed to human rights abuses.³⁹ Sweeping assaults on Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities and the disregard for human rights during the Uribe administration suggests that the price of professionalization of the Colombian military was quite high.

A model like Plan Colombia is also problematic because it does not provide sufficient resources for addressing development issues. Unemployment, inequality, and lack of opportunities are contributing factors to drug trafficking and organized crime. The problem of the *ninis*—youth who *ni estudian ni trabajan* (neither work nor study)—has become a major issue in many Latin American countries, not just Colombia.⁴⁰ A model that seeks to focus on combating the supply of drugs fails to address the socioeconomic challenges. Coca cultivation remains a major issue in Colombia because campesinos do not have other viable options as other products do not grow in the jungle or the Andes Mountains.⁴¹ In addition, peasant farmers can earn more for growing coca than other products, which helps explain why they resort to cultivating coca.

Conclusion

Drug trafficking, organized crime, and guerrilla movements as well as other forms of insurgency will continue to be key priorities on the U.S. national security agenda. Debates have existed among academics and policy analysts as to how successful Plan Colombia has been. While some analysts have argued that Plan Colombia has been very successful as security has increased in Colombia,⁴² others have questioned the accomplishments of this Plan. Adam Isacson asserts that “[w]ords like ‘success’ and ‘model’ are unhelpful to understanding Colombia’s experience. It has come with too many scandals, abuses, disappointments and high costs to be considered a template for other troubled states receiving U.S. assistance, like Mexico or Afghanistan.”⁴³ Some individuals, like Isacson, have argued that the security gains of Plan Colombia could be reversed and question whether Colombia is safer today.⁴⁴ There are still other internal armed actors in Colombia and human rights abuses continue to be a major concern, particularly among certain sectors of the population such as Afro-Colombians, labor organizations, and various indigenous groups.

Models like Plan Colombia that focus on “hard” components fail to address the various underlying challenges such as corruption, impunity, and weak institutions. In addition, some experts have argued that Plan Colombia has not been successful in terms of drugs as coca cultivation and drug production have continued. In sum, Plan Colombia shows that there are key lessons for policy-makers with regard to what has worked and what has not worked in efforts to combat drug trafficking as well as guerilla organizations.⁴⁵ It is important to note that each country is different, and a general model does not take into consideration the nuances of each country.

Notes

- 1 A special thanks to Hector Cadavid and Daniela Campos for reviewing the article.
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- 3 Ernesto Londoño, "Taking Stock of the \$10 Billion Washington Spent on Colombia's War," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2015.
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- 12 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, *Logros de la Política de Defensa y Seguridad Todos por un Nuevo País* (Bogotá, CO: Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2015).
- 13 Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, *Logros de la Política de Defensa y Seguridad Todos por un Nuevo País*, p. 8.
- 14 For more on this topic, see Dan Restrepo, Frank O. Mora, Brian Fonseca, and Jonathan D. Rosen, *The United States and Colombia: From Security Partners to Global Partners in Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2016).
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- 30** James Stavridis, "We Know How to End Drug Violence in Central America: Stick to what worked in Colombia," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2015; Michael Lohmuller, "Plan Colombia is not a Cure-All for Latin America's Woes," *InSight Crime*.
- 31** Michael Lohmuller, "Plan Colombia is not a Cure-All for Latin America's Woes," p. 7.
- 32** Afghanistan is a Muslim country and a tribal society. The idea that a cookie cutter model could be exported to this country, which is completely different than Colombia, is problematic in nature. Afghanistan does not have the same political system and arguably has never had a state.
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