

Learning through our Mistakes: the Legacy of Marxism in Colombian Counter-Insurgency Strategy

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With this working paper I aim at sharing my thoughts about the Marxist legacy in counter-insurgency strategy in Colombia.

Since 1964, we have seen the formation of more than 20 Marxist-Leninist organizations in Colombia from which the most well-known groups are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Their main goal was to seize state power and to implement a Marxist-Leninist regime. As General Ospina Ovalle and Thomas Marks have written, “Colombian governments from the mid-1960s tended erroneously to assess FARC not as the proto-insurgents they had become but as remnants of the earlier peasant revolt, 1948–1960.”² In the past 50 years, successive Colombian government undertook several plans to deal

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² The origins of the conflict in Colombia date back nearly to independence in the early nineteenth century, yet the conflict was the result of forces unleashed within the peasantry by the terrible violence and repression of a civil war, *La Violencia* (‘The Violence’), which convulsed the country from 1948 to 1960. *La Violencia* involved the Liberal and Conservative parties – the latter then the government. Simultaneously, the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) worked to politicize these bodies and foment unrest. The initial goal of self-defense progressed to insurgency. See Carlos Ospina Ovalle and Thomas Marks “Colombia: Changing strategy amidst the struggle,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies Journal* 2, 2 (2014): pp. 357, 361.

with those insurgencies with strategies that tried to evolve from previous ones. Nonetheless, as Marks has mentioned elsewhere, there was a failure to understand Mao's thought and approach to irregular challenges in warfare.³ Most of the insurgent groups in Colombia used a traditional Marxist strategy that combined *all the forms of struggle*. The means employed were inspired by the various types of political warfare as defined by the Fu Hsing Kang College in Taiwan that put emphasis on ideological, organizational, intelligence, psychological, masses and stratagem. At the beginning, it was difficult for the State to understand the nature of this war because these insurgent organizations were fighting against the Colombian State itself, not just its military branch. The Colombian taught at first that a military action was the adequate response to this threat. Nonetheless, there are unexpected changes in war and our conception of counterinsurgency (COIN) had to evolve.⁴ It is not static.

What have we learn from the insurgency in Colombia during all those years of war? To quote General Rupert Smith, we learned what it meant to "fight amongst the people, not on the battlefield."⁵

Steps towards a Comprehensive Approach to COIN in Colombia

In a previous analysis on the absence of security and defence policies published in the Latin American Security and Defence Network (RESDAL), I suggested that the speech delivered by President Carlos Alberto Lleras Restrepo to the Colombian military on May 9, 1958, was an undoubted landmark in Colombian security doctrine.⁶ This speech contributed to the detachment of military forces from partisan politics, but, at the same time, placed civilians at a distance from national security issues. It was the main reason for the usual absence of support from civilian institutions towards security

³ See Thomas Marks, "Mao Tse-tung and the Search for 21st Century Counterinsurgency" *Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC)*, West Point, (October. 2009). Online: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/mao-tse-tung-and-the-search-for-21st-century-counterinsurgency>

⁴ See Oscar Palma Morales, "The Evolution of Counterinsurgency Warfare: A historical Overview", *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad* 6, 2 (2009.): pp. 195-200. Online: http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1909-30632011000200010

⁵ See Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

⁶ See Jesús Alberto Ruiz Mora, "From the 'Strategic Leap' to 'Democratic Prosperity', A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean," *RESDAL* (2010): p. 180. Online: <http://www.resdal.org/atlas/atlas10-ing-14-colombia.pdf>

and defence policies when came the time to consolidate military forces' successes. The Colombian government decided that the military should not be involved in the political environment. Even military personnel were not to participate in the deliberation of Colombian politics and operational designs; they were in charge of the responsibility of national defence. Like my fellow Colombian, David Andrés Rodríguez Camacho, wrote in his 2014 thesis it was an attempt to keep the military from taking power therefore: "Civil-military relations in Colombia had been marked by distrust and distance between the military and the executive branch. The Lleras doctrine regarding civil - military relations prevailed in the subsequent governments."⁷ Obviously this approach was in contradiction with what should be an integrated operational design appropriated for contemporary COIN.

During the first decades of war, the FARC threat kept growing. In fact, since 1982, the FARC has taxed the narcotics trade. The relationship with drugs gave the FARC the financial means to seek implementation of its military project, which called for seizing the Colombian state power. The FARC expand its forces tenfold, reaching a strength of some 18 000 to 20 000 fighters around 2001. However, as General Ospina Ovalle has mentioned about the FARC and drug trafficking:

From the moment it entered into this relationship, despite recognizing the risk, the FARC increasingly became a captive of its own means. The military and political cause served as the movement's motivating force, to which social and economic issues, though rhetorically significant, were subordinated. FARC embraced the struggle against rural poverty, discrimination and exclusion, and social class structure in the abstract and made them components of its narrative, but it took few tangible steps to address these challenges, even in isolated areas where it held sway.⁸

It was nonetheless a period of rapid growth for the guerrillas. The State remained incapable of developing an appropriated response to the Marxist insurgency.

⁷ See David Andrés Rodríguez Camacho. *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Colombia: An Assessment of the Colombian Army Transformation from 1998 to 2010* (Thesis at Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 2014), p. 30. Online:

http://www.banrepultural.org/sites/default/files/colf_rodriguezcamacho_david_andres_tesis-1.pdf

⁸ See Carlos Ospina "Colombia and the FARC: From Military Victory to Ambivalent Political Reintegration?" *Center for Complex Operations CCO* (2016): p. 153, online:

<http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/780177/chapter-6-colombia-and-the-farc-from-military-victory-to-ambivalent-political-r/>

We assisted to some isolated joint efforts by civilian and military branches of the government but there was never an integrated action between civilians and military. Yet, as the war evolved some attempts were made by the Colombian government. For instance, there was an effort to bring peace between 1982 and 1984, under the presidency of Belisario Betancur who negotiated a cease-fire with the FARC. Unfortunately, the Palacio de Justicia's siege in 1985, an attack from members of the Marxist guerrilla group M-19 against the Supreme Court of Colombia, killed the peace efforts and added fire to the conflict.

Reconsidering our War

If violence is critical to insurgencies, according to Mao's theory, the most important element remains "the cause" or the politics of the insurgent effort. Therefore, as Marks has underlined elsewhere regarding the influence of Mao Tse-Tung's strategic thought and its links to contemporary COIN in Colombia, when violence allows "the cause" to advance, it is with five complementary and intertwined lines of effort: violence with politics, winning allies outside the movement, using non-violence to make violence more effective and international efforts. When these lines of effort are the "answers" to five questions a counterinsurgent must ask of any irregular challenge:

1. What is the political content of the movement?
2. Who are its domestic allies?
3. How is it using violence?
4. How is it using non-violence?
5. What is it doing internationally?⁹

Besides FARC's anachronistic fidelity to Marxism in a Post-Cold War world, the overall security environment in Colombia during the 1990s was also characterized by the involvement of *narcos* and self-defence organizations. An amalgam of drug trafficking, violence, kidnapping saturated the Colombian public opinion towards violence and 'the cause.' Yet the Colombian government and the military were still not

⁹ See Thomas Marks, "Mao Tse-tung and the Search for 21st Century Counterinsurgency" *Combatting Terrorism Center* (October 2009). Online: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/mao-tse-tung-and-the-search-for-21st-century-counterinsurgency>

efficiently coordinating their efforts to eradicate the insurgency. The problem was that the government at large did not fight the security problem; the responsibility was relegated to the military. In 1995, the situation became critical as the FARC surpassed military capacities and political power. This is when COIN operational design shifted, and the political decision became a triangular policy that included the United States government, the Colombian government and the Colombian Armed Forces. More specifically, the ascension of Andres Pastrana to the presidency in 1998 paved the way for this new partnership between the United States and Colombia, as he attempted to resolve the conflict with the FARC. In 1999, the Colombian government presented to Washington a six-year initiative called Plan Colombia intended to strengthen the legitimacy and security problem of the country. The United States started sending equipment, military advisors and other resources to fight the insurgents. However, Plan Colombia, implemented in 2000, focused more on drug eradication and COIN than on development. Before this triangular cooperation between the United States, the Colombian Government and Armed Forces, the terrorist threat kept growing. With the arrival of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez in 2002, the vision of COIN started to change into methods that did not focus on the destruction the insurgency directly, but on the disruption of the link between insurgents and its popular base, the civilian communities within which they operated.

The Democratic Security Policy to neutralise the FARC

In 2002, one of the biggest changes in operational design was the Democratic Security Policy (DSP).¹⁰ Until then, there was an important lack of a political commitment toward national security, along with poor civil-military relations, prevented a comprehensive and coordinated national-level COIN campaign to overcome the internal armed conflict. As I have written elsewhere:

¹⁰ The concept of democratic security meant a transformation of the security and defence notions in Colombia, as it resulted in the Executive Branch's final commitment to subjects of a sensible political-strategic value for the nation. Combining the work of the armed forces with the support of civilian agencies was one of the strengths of the PSD. See Ruiz Mora "From the 'Strategic Leap' to 'Democratic Prosperity', A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean," *RESDAL* (2010): p. 180, Online: <http://www.resdal.org/atlas/atlas10-ing-14-colombia.pdf>

This does not mean that such commitment did not exist before, but rather that the lack of articulation between national policy and military conduct explicitly led to transforming military forces in the favourite instrument for domestic public order control, which was resorted to in recurrent but erratic manners, instead of looking for structural changes.¹¹

Beyond military action to restore territorial control, the DSP was an integrated strategy that promoted political and economic tools for the social recovery of the affected Colombian territories. By 2002, the Colombian Army had undergone a successful adaptation and restructuring process fostered from inside the institution by innovative military leaders, who developed an appropriate COIN approach to contain the menace posed by illegal armed groups. That is where some of Mao's insights were used for counterinsurgency. As assessed by Marks, the FARC adopted people's war yet consistently overemphasizing the violence line of effort. Therefore, it became:

[...] a large focus in search of a mass base, thus a perfect target for a multifaceted, whole-of-government response by the state. Bogota grasped the heart of the matter and built success. That success first came from a sound assessment of the flawed adoption of the people's war approach by FARC within a rapidly changing global context; second, through mobilizing the inherent strengths of a democratic order. The strategy of "Democratic Security" used lines of effort that neutralized FARC's own strategy and operational art even as popular mobilization swamped the insurgents.¹²

Interagency cooperation found a proper path in 2004 through President Uribe's Coordination Centre for Integrated Action (*Acción integral*). The military, the police and all ministries were included in this effort that also encompass oversight and

¹¹ See Jesús Alberto Ruiz Mora, "From the 'Strategic Leap' to 'Democratic Prosperity', A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean," *RESDAL* (2010): p. 180, Online: <http://www.resdal.org/atlas/atlas10-ing-14-colombia.pdf>

¹² See Thomas Marks. "Mao Tse-tung and the Search for 21st Century Counterinsurgency" *Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC)*, West Point, (October 2009). Online: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/mao-tse-tung-and-the-search-for-21st-century-counterinsurgency>

international cooperation agencies with the goal of strengthening the government's presence in territories under the influence of illegal armed groups.¹³

The Second Administration of *President Uribe* (2006–2010) was also characterised by political commitment to a coherent, comprehensive and successful strategic plan to defeat the insurgency. For instance, this type of shared responsibility between the civilians, the military and the Strategic review Committee and Innovation (*Comite de Revision Estrategica e Innovación* (CRE-I))¹⁴ gave birth to another strategy named 'Sword of Honour' to counter the FARC and other hostile organisations in areas where the groups and Colombia's economic interests overlap. It was part of the idea that the responsibility to fight an insurgency is not exclusive of security institutions, but of a wider range of state and even societal organizations; and where actions must be conducted in areas that go beyond the reach of security actors. In 2016, we were still using that operational design based on a Center of Gravity (CoG) focusing on the legitimacy of the State and through an inter-agential cooperation. The military have also designed a new plan for the peace process where the Armed Forces are now fundamental elements for post-conflict Colombia.¹⁵ We are offering the Colombian government all our non-armed capacities. This will contribute to enhance development and national security through cooperation.

¹³ See Brigadier General Ricardo Jiménez Mejía. "Interagency cooperation in the Colombian Armed Forces" *Dialogo Digital Military Magazine* (2014). Online: <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/interagency-cooperation-colombian-armed-forces>

¹⁴ Like Coronel Pedro Rojas mentions in his text on Damasco in this issue, the renewed doctrine of the National Army of Colombia in this special edition, it is within CRE-I that the "Sword of Honour strategy plan" was designed to achieve the final defeat of the narco-terrorist groups through a coordinated, joint and interagency work.

¹⁵ In the newly proposed post-conflict scenario in Colombia, the Armed Forces are engaged in a process of transformation, and one of the objectives of this process is to increase and improve joint operations, that is, those planned and executed by two or more military forces. The first step towards this objective occurred in 2003 with the creation of the Omega Joint Task Force, based on the experience of the United States Armed Forces. See P. J. Rojas-Guevara, "Operaciones conjuntas: Operación Libertad para Irak y su comparación con la estrategia militar conjunta en Colombia," *Papel Político* 20, 2 (2015): pp. 613-623.

Conclusion

Between 2002 and 2010, political factors were favourable to a successful COIN campaign against the insurgency that converged with an effective transformation of the Colombian Army.¹⁶ It was the Democratic Security Policy (DSP) that brought stability in Colombia because it integrated for a long period civilian and military actions on a large scale for the first time in decades. As General Ospina Ovalle has mentioned in this issue, at the beginning of the Twenty first century, the international community considered Colombia a failed state.¹⁷ As he and Marks have mentioned elsewhere: “Central to the successful reversal was the application of elements of Clausewitzian philosophy (and ultimately whole-of-government warfighting) by key personalities within the Colombian military and government. Particularly important was the correct identification of the nature of the war”.¹⁸ From Mao’s “people’s war” we applied the strategy of winning hearts and minds of Colombians in our new COIN.

¹⁶ As David A. Rodriguez Camacho (2014) also shows in his thesis, it was a combination of internally generated, bottom-up and top-down organizational innovations, U.S. security assistance, and dynamic management from President Alvaro Uribe and a civilianized Ministry of Defense that was able to restore Colombian Army morale, restructure and reorganize the military into an offensive force able to gain battlefield dominance and restore government authority over a greater part of the national territory.

¹⁷ Ovalle and Marks, “Colombia,” p. 356.

¹⁸ I do agree with the authors when they say: “there is no doubt that the Colombian experience is one of the most important in recent years for those who must deal with the complex, interagency, international effort that is modern counterinsurgency” (Ovalle and Marks, “Colombia,” p. 369).