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## SUMMARY

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Current instability in Colombia derives from the interaction and resulting synergies stemming from two distinct tendencies: the development of an underground criminal drug economy and the growth of armed challenges to the state's authority. The first source of instability is reflected in the increasingly pervasive influence of drug networks and their infiltration of key societal institutions; the second is the growth of guerrilla armies as well as the development of organized violence perpetrated by illegal self-defense forces, also known as paramilitaries. The actions of drug traffickers, guerrillas, and paramilitaries have exacerbated deeper problems in Colombian society: the central government's loss of authority, economic deterioration, and social disintegration.

The synergy of which the title of this report speaks occurs because the strength of the guerrillas (particularly the largest group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym, FARC) is directly linked to the guerrillas' control of drug-producing and drug-processing areas. Income from drug trafficking and other illegal activities provides the FARC with the resources to intensify its political and military challenge to the Colombian state.<sup>1</sup> This synergy of drugs and insurgency has generated a new kind of security

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<sup>1</sup>To some degree, the Colombian situation can be understood as part of a category of civil conflicts that has recently come to the attention of scholars: insurgencies that derive their political and military strength from access to revenues from export commodities—in the case of Colombia, drugs. See Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Justice-Seeking and Loot-Seeking in Civil War," presentation to World Bank workshop, Washington, D.C., 1999.

threat—neither an old-fashioned insurgency nor a simple criminal cartel, but a threat that incorporates elements and strengths of both.

From the standpoint of Colombia's security, this threat is primarily political and military. For the FARC leadership, funding from the illegal drug traffic is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The end is political power. It follows that solutions that address the problem as one of countering criminal activity rather than a political-military challenge to the state are likely to miss the target.

The policy problem, for both Colombia and the United States, is that, publicly at least, "Plan Colombia," the Bogotá government's blueprint for restoring stability, and U.S. support for it, are predicated on a doubtful strategy. The strategy gives pride of place to moving against the drug producers and traffickers, on the argument that drying up funding from drugs will undermine the guerrillas' strength. Yet it is far from certain that the strategy will succeed. The guerrillas have other sources of financing, and the illegal drug trade has demonstrated the capacity to adapt and adjust to counter-narcotics strategies. Nor, based on historical experience, is it clear that alternative sources of income for coca farmers can be developed very soon. In these circumstances, moving against the drug-producing areas could have the effect of increasing support for the guerrillas among those who stand to lose their livelihood.

The contraction of the Colombian government's authority has significant implications for regional stability. There has already been a spillover of the armed conflict in Colombia into neighboring states. Colombia's neighbors fear that they are caught between a hammer and an anvil. They are concerned that if Colombia and its allies move aggressively against the drug-producing areas in southern Colombia, traffickers and guerrillas would look for sanctuaries and bases of operations across Colombia's borders. Conversely, if security conditions in Colombia deteriorate further, the regional reverberations could be much worse.

#### **THE ILLEGAL DRUG TRADE AND U.S. COUNTER-NARCOTICS POLICY**

For the past two decades, U.S. policy toward Colombia has been dominated by efforts to stem the flow of cocaine and, more recently,

heroin, from the Andean region of South America to the United States. In the early 1990s, the focus of U.S. counter-narcotics policy shifted from interdicting illegal drugs from Mexican and Caribbean transit zones to attacking the production and refining at the source in Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia. There have been increasing indications, however, that this approach has not succeeded in reducing the drug problem. Since 1995 the area under coca cultivation in Colombia has expanded by over 140 percent. The large drug cartels that dominated the cocaine trade in the early 1990s have been replaced by groupings that are flatter, less hierarchical, and more diversified, and hence harder to penetrate. Moreover, disruption of the so-called air bridge connecting coca growers in Bolivia and Peru with refiners in Colombia has impelled traffickers to integrate production closer to home, so that most of the coca used for cocaine production is now grown in Colombia. In addition, traffickers have diversified into heroin production from poppies also grown in Colombia.

## **INSURGENCY AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

Over the same period (1980s to the present), guerrilla activity has dramatically expanded. From ambushes and small-scale attacks, the guerrillas, particularly the FARC, moved to multicolumn operations involving hundreds of fighters. At the same time, the guerrillas expanded their area of operations from their original base areas in thinly populated, inhospitable regions on Colombia's periphery to densely populated and economically strategic areas closer to Colombia's major cities. Both the FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) have demonstrated the capacity to cut off land communications between major cities and to disrupt the country's electrical and petroleum infrastructure almost at will. Over the last five years, the FARC has established new fronts on the eastern cordillera of the Andes, bringing it closer to Bogotá and giving it control of poppy-growing areas and a stake in the growing heroin trade.

The Pastrana government's hopes for restoring peace rest in the success of negotiations with the guerrillas. To demonstrate its good faith, Bogotá conceded to the FARC effective control of a "demilitarized zone" of some 42,000 square kilometers in south-central Colombia. This "state within the state" constitutes a major

strategic asset for the FARC. The FARC uses this sanctuary as a base for launching operations, resting and refitting its forces, moving and refining drugs, stockpiling arms, and even holding prisoners and hostages. As of this writing, the Colombian government was considering the establishment of a smaller demilitarized zone for the ELN in the middle Magdalena valley.

Despite these concessions by the Colombian government, the question remains whether the FARC really wants a peace settlement. In Guatemala, El Salvador, and other cases, the key to a settlement was the agreement of the rebel forces to demobilize in exchange for guarantees of personal security and participation in a democratic political process. The guerrillas in those countries agreed to these arrangements when they had been essentially defeated (Guatemala) or had come to realize that a military victory was not possible (El Salvador). In Colombia, by contrast, the guerrillas have not been defeated, and the military situation is far too fluid to be considered a stalemate.

At the same time, both the government and the FARC have an interest in continuing the negotiations, even if conditions for a peace settlement are not present. The government has staked its credibility on the negotiating track and hopes that the negotiations will develop a momentum that will enmesh the FARC in the process. For its part, the FARC derives substantial advantages from the talks. The negotiations enhance its domestic and international stature and legitimacy and, by sanctioning the continued operation of the “demilitarized zone,” the negotiating arrangements give the FARC some real strategic and operational advantages.

The third party in Colombia’s three-sided civil war is the *autodefensas*, the illegal self-defense forces, also known as paramilitaries. These groups, organized under an umbrella organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), initially emerged in reaction to guerrilla violence. They are particularly active in areas where the state has lost the capacity to provide security to the population. The AUC has committed egregious human rights violations and is increasingly involved in the drug trade. Yet, its numbers have continued to grow and its forces have succeeded in displacing the guerrillas from a number of contested areas.

For the Colombian government, the dilemma is whether to treat the illegal self-defense groups as political actors, and thus as legitimate participants in the peace negotiations, or as criminals to be suppressed. Colombian public opinion is divided on the matter, and so far the government has taken the second track. Nevertheless, whether accepted as legitimate political actors or not, these groups have become another power center challenging the state's already frayed authority. Realistically, because the paramilitaries are the product of an environment of insecurity, they will continue to be a factor in Colombia's crisis as long as the conditions that gave rise to them are not changed. An alternative approach could be to establish a network of government-supervised self-defense organizations. Legalized self-defense units could at least give the central government more control over their activities, and possibly improve the prospects for peace by empowering local communities to provide for their own security.

The Colombian military suffered devastating defeats at the hands of the FARC from 1996 to 1998 and is now trying hard to adapt and modernize. New operational and tactical approaches have produced some improved results, especially in an increased tempo of counter-insurgency actions. This said, the armed forces have not yet developed the capability to control the guerrillas, let alone defeat them. Indeed, while the military has the advantage in numbers and firepower, for the most part the guerrillas maintain the operational and tactical initiative.

## **PLAN COLOMBIA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. DEFENSE PLANNING**

Plan Colombia, the Colombian government's response to the crisis, incorporates elements of a national strategy to reverse the downside trends and reestablish its authority in areas controlled or contested by guerrillas and other non-state actors. However, there is criticism that the Colombian government strategy derives less from an analysis of the situation in Colombia than from U.S. political constraints that can justify aid only in terms of counter-narcotics assistance. Moreover, the Colombian government's political strategy relies on the success of the peace negotiations—a problematic prospect—and lacks a clear link to well-defined political-military goals.

Aside from strategic clarity, the Colombian government needs to develop adequate implementation instrumentalities. Developing a capable military force will require a thoroughgoing military reform, including implementation of the Colombian High Command's goal of replacing conscripts—who currently constitute 70 percent of the military personnel—with an all-volunteer force, and remedying weaknesses in mobility, intelligence, and communications. Also, the police and military operations in counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency efforts need to be better integrated.

All of this will require adequate funding. The proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) (3.56 percent) that Colombia spends on defense and security has not changed much since the early 1990s. That figure is higher than the average for Latin America, but far too low for a country fighting an active insurgency. Colombia has critical unmet needs in the social and economic spheres, but there are irreducible military requirements that will have to be met if the Colombian government is to restore a climate of security that is a prerequisite for economic and social recovery.

The United States recognizes the nexus between the guerrillas and the drug traffic, but sees the problem as essentially one of counter-narcotics policy. As a result, U.S. efforts are focused on strengthening Colombian anti-narcotics capabilities while insisting that U.S. military assistance is not directed against the guerrillas themselves. U.S. policy therefore misses the point that the political and military control that the guerrillas exercise over an ever-larger part of Colombia's territory and population is at the heart of their challenge to the Bogotá government's authority. The United States ought to rethink whether this distinction between counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency can be sustained, and whether Colombia and its allies can be successful in the war against drugs if the Colombian government fails to regain control of its territory.

By taking the lead in mustering international support for Plan Colombia, the United States has raised its stake in the success of the Colombian government's strategy. If that strategy falters, the United States would be confronted with the choice of either escalating its commitment or scaling it down. The latter option would involve a significant loss of credibility and a degradation of the United States' ability to protect its interests in this critical region. To avoid this out-

come, the United States would have to provide sustained support until the Colombian government regains the political and military initiative.

To help Colombia improve its conventional military capabilities, the first priority is to develop new concepts of operations to detect, identify, and attack light infantry (guerrilla) targets. Air-land synergies, which the Colombian military has employed in encounters since 1998, have proven effective in countering the guerrilla tactic of massing to attack isolated government positions or units. To do still better will require improved intelligence on the type, location, and activities of the adversary. Newly developed platforms, sensors, weapons, and analytic tools could be brought to bear as well. No less important is awareness of the vulnerabilities of air-land strategies. In the battle of Dabeida (see Chapter Four), the guerrillas' ability to interfere with the helicopters that the Colombian military relies on for air mobility left government forces dangerously exposed.

The United States should also assist the Colombian government in regaining control of the major roads and the 18,000 kilometers of navigable rivers that serve as highways for guerrillas and drug traffickers. Road and river control can go a long way in helping the Colombian government establish a "bubble of security" that is necessary for other activities—such as civil affairs and economic and social reconstruction—to proceed.

The second prong of a proactive U.S. strategy is to work with concerned Latin American countries to contain the threat of spillover and regional destabilization. The United States should explore ways of helping countries such as Panama and Ecuador regain control of their borders with Colombia. Shutting down to the extent possible the narco-traffickers' and guerrillas' pipeline is critical to the success of any strategy. At the same time, the United States should start to lay the groundwork for a multilateral inter-American response in the event that the crisis in Colombia intensifies and spills beyond its borders.

There are significant operational-level implications for the U.S. Air Force, which are being documented in another report. The turnover of Howard Air Force Base to Panama in 1999 deprived the United States of its most important air base south of the continental United

States. None of the operating facilities used by the United States for the counter-narcotics mission (Curacao and Aruba; Manta, Ecuador; and Comalapa, El Salvador) has the geographic advantages of the former Howard air base in Panama. Although the condition of the base and political sensitivities preclude a return to Howard at this time, the infrequently used cargo runway at Tocumen airport near Panama City is an option that could be explored with the Panamanian government.

In conclusion, understanding the Colombian labyrinth drives home the realization that drugs and insurgency are intertwined in complicated and changing ways, but the former cannot be addressed without dealing with the latter. This argues for improving Colombia's capabilities, especially in the military sphere. At the same time, the United States needs to work with Colombia's neighbors to contain the spillover of the drug trade and the civil conflict in Colombia and the risk of regional destabilization.