

“The Effect of Post-9/11 US Foreign Policy on Colombia’s Drug Trade”
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As the twin towers collapsed the morning of September 11, 2001, the world knew things would never be the same. Much of the immediate analysis focused on the Middle East and Afghanistan, but as the third largest recipient of US aid in the world, Colombia deserves attention in this respect as well. This paper explores the role of changes in US foreign policy toward Colombia, specifically the effect of changes in the restrictions on US aid, with a specific focus on how this has changed the drug trade. The hypothesis is that while the war on drugs was not as successful as was hoped, the mixing of the anti-drug agenda with the anti-terror agenda will dilute both causes, leaving Colombia less safe and with higher levels of drug cultivation and trafficking in the coming years.

In the wake of September 11 and with congressional haste to go after terrorism abroad in virtually any form, the administration moved quickly to expand US involvement in Colombia to provide direct counterinsurgency and intelligence assistance. Within one month of September 11, the US government had announced that it would provide Colombia with counterterrorism aid as part of Washington's new war on terrorism. Given their systematic use of tactics that target non-combatants, each of the illegal armed actors in Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC, Ejercito de Liberación Nacional - ELN, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC) had been designated by the State Department as a terrorist organization prior to 9/11. However, since that date, the term “terrorist” has been used very generally and imprecisely to associate Colombia’s illegal internal actors with groups like al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups with global reach. Such a misleading association fosters the misunderstanding that deeper U.S.

military engagement in Colombia is justified – indeed, even required – as part of the effort against global terrorism.

Changes in US foreign policy coincided nicely with domestic changes in Colombia, namely the 2002 election of Alvaro Uribe, a candidate who ran on a “law and order” platform and promised to take a hard line against the guerrillas, ending the peace process begun by his predecessor, Andrés Pastrana. While Clinton and Pastrana had been devotees of the peace process, Uribe and Bush were quick to emphasize security, and the events of September 11, 2001 put the Colombian government in a position to feasibly influence US policy and allow anti-narcotics aid to be subtly transitioned into counter-terrorism aid. Bush’s budget for 2004 includes \$565 million additional for Colombia.

The era of the war on drugs was ending, and in its place came the war on terror; the narco-guerrillas became the narco-terrorists. There have been two major shifts in US policy toward Colombia, within the framework of Plan Colombia, since September 11: an increase in the number of US military personnel allowed to be in Colombia at any time and a change in the mission of US troops in the country from counter narcotics only to counter insurgency and training Colombian troops to guard the oil pipeline in addition to drug control.

Troop Cap

Pre-September 11 US law permitted the deployment of up to 400 US military personnel and up to 400 U.S. civilian contractors in Colombia at any given time. In the changing post-September 11 climate, the Bush administration requested a doubling of allowable military personnel from 400 to 800 and on civilian contractors from 400 to 600.

The increase in the troop cap was approved in October of 2004, and to many represented a drastic increase (indeed, it is a 100% increase in official US military presence and a 50%

increase in defense contractors) in US involvement in Colombia. SouthCom General James T. Hill has portrayed raising the personnel cap as a relatively minor modification that would ultimately be worthwhile, and would be highly effective in building on the Colombian military's successes¹. However, most military analysts, both in the US and Colombia, state that in reality the FARC has not suffered heavy losses, that its leadership is intact, and that it appears to be biding its time until Uribe is out of office. This represents a major shift in US involvement in Colombia, and is a direct result of the events of September 11.

Mission Change

The increase in the troop cap was especially troubling to many considering that it coincided with the Bush Administration offering substantial new levels of military aid in support of a massive Colombian military offensive against the FARC insurgents, known as "Plan Patriota." This plan included 17,000 Colombian troops and involved a large-scale counterinsurgency mission in southern Colombia, traditional FARC territory, with the US providing logistical and intelligence support.

This kind of support represents a dramatic departure from traditional US involvement in Colombia, which has long been strictly confined, by law, to anti-narcotics intervention with the military and, in some cases, the police. Since September 11, this anti-narcotics work has been expanded to include explicit support for both counter insurgency operations and the training of specific battalions to protect the oil pipeline.

Counterinsurgency

The Colombian government has long wanted the US to provide more counterinsurgency aid, while the US has generally only been interested in providing counter narcotics assistance. However, September 11 changed this dramatically, putting Colombia in a better position to

¹ Hill, 2004

request assistance to battle groups that were already on the State department's list of terrorists. In late 2003 the Department of Defense approved an increase of US troops to execute direct offensives against specific regions of Colombia through this plan. These assaults are carried out by a combination of military and contractors, who are leading over 20,000 Colombian soldiers. These offensives are largely concentrated in the departments of Putumayo, Caquetá, Nariño, and Meta. This underscores the potential for escalation beyond the mission understood by Congress and beyond the appetite of the American public.

Oil Pipeline

In the last 15 years Colombia's oil pipelines have suffered 950 attacks by both the ELN and FARC. The Caño-Limón pipeline, the most commonly attacked, is located in eastern Colombia, traditional territory of the ELN. The second central component of the mission expansion in the wake of September 11 would protect oil interests in Colombia. The US will provide \$98 million for training for the Colombian army to be able to protect the Caño Limon-Coveñas pipeline, operated by the California-based Occidental Petroleum and carrying oil primarily for export to the United States.

Three 100-man army units will be trained to act as "rapid deployment forces²" when guerrilla forces attack the pipeline. The pipeline provides Occidental Petroleum with about 35 million barrels of oil a year, for which it pays about 50 cents per barrel in security costs³. Again, these are major shifts in US involvement in Colombia, directly resulting from the changes in US policy and priorities in the aftermath of September 11.

The War on Drugs

² Dudley, 2002

³ Isacson, 2002.

So how has the drug trade been influenced by the changes in US policy toward Colombia in the past four years? The biggest effect has been a slight ease in the years of pressure on the traffickers and farmers, who were the primary target of the massive US aid for more than 5 years. However, to build a bridge between the formerly counter narcotics-only strategy in Colombia and the new, terrorism-focused policy, the US government is building intellectual bridges between drugs and terrorism. Aside from its obvious importance to policy makers in the US, the drug trade has had a substantial impact on Colombia's ongoing armed conflict, and understanding the evolution of Colombia's drug trade is key to understanding this conflict.

Any armed conflict is unsustainable without financial resources to support it, and the drug trade provides these resources in Colombia, with drugs often being exchanged directly for guns and other light arms. In the absence of these resources, the war would likely have long ago dropped to lower levels, making it much more difficult to sustain the conflict. In addition, conflict often erupts over control of the financial resources at stake, creating a vicious cycle of competition for resources fueling conflict, which is in turn fueled by these same resources. The fight over resources produced by drug trafficking has also spurred violence in rural areas. While traditional theory has it that poverty fuels violence, in Colombia it has been apparent that the opposite is also true. In many cases, commodity wealth exists in contrast to an overall lack of economic resources and a sense of injustice over inequitable distribution of wealth and resources often sparks the violence.

At first glance, drug trafficking seems to bring spectacular advantages to Colombia's economy. It is the largest single source of foreign exchange and likely contributes more to gross national product (GNP) than any other industry in Colombia, including coffee. Steiner⁴ refers to articles in which estimates range from \$18 billion to \$25 billion in annual profits from the sale of

⁴ Steiner, 1997

illegal drugs. In 1995, profits of \$25 billion would have represented the equivalent of 31% of Colombia's GNP. It employs an estimated 300,000 people throughout the country⁵, and has made some of the largest narcotraffickers into billionaires⁶. Despite these positive factors, the effect of the drug trade on the Colombian economy has generally been negative, especially when the effects of money laundering are considered. The drug trade contributes to an overvaluation of the peso, higher interest rates, and the loss of viability of legal enterprises in a sea of money laundering enterprises that do not necessarily need to make a profit to survive. And of course, in a weaker economy more people are driven into illegal enterprises.

Drug trafficking also causes direct expenses to the state, diverting money that could otherwise be used productively. One of the largest expenses is the cost of law enforcement – police salaries and overhead, the cost of prosecution and the cost of imprisonment. In 1995, drug related law enforcement expenses alone took 2% of Colombia's entire GNP⁷. Another of the largest problems caused by narcotics trafficking is the overvaluation of the exchange rate. An overvalued currency makes a country, in this case Colombia, uncompetitive on the international market, because goods being exported come at too high a price. Also, an overvalued currency will provoke some businesses to move their manufacturing overseas, to avoid paying overpriced salaries, adding an indirect influence on employment levels to the cost of an overvalued exchange rate. Meanwhile, because this currency imbalance makes exports more costly, it also makes imports cheaper, further undermining domestic businesses and again contributing to the high levels of unemployment.

Furthermore, the drug trade also plays an important role in other challenges facing Colombia today, especially in the corruption of elected and non-elected government officials.

⁶ Clawson and Lee 1996, 192

⁷ Guevara Gil 1995, 1B

Beyond basic corruption and bribery, the drug trade has contributed to a decrease in efficacy of the judicial system and prison system, leaving Colombia with one of the highest levels of impunity in the world, approaching 99% in many cases⁸. An effective democratic government must consist of strong economic policy, a fair and effectual judiciary system, and mechanisms to protect the social welfare of its citizens.

Changes in the Flow of Drugs Since September 11

The drug trade has long limited the degree of freedom both the US and Colombian governments have had in dealing with the myriad of problems facing Colombia – the US government limited by a mandate to combat drug traffic and a wariness of getting involved in another country’s civil war, and the Colombian government has been limited by restrictions on US aid that prevent the money and equipment from being used in counterinsurgency efforts. However, with the events of September 11 and the changes in US aid, much of this has changed. The net result in the past four years has been astounding. While the State Department proclaims that the war on drugs has been successful by citing decreases in cultivation of coca in the regions where fumigation is taking place, when the number of hectares being fumigated is combined with the hectares under cultivation, overall cultivation in Colombia has increased. State Department estimates show a total of 114,000 hectares of coca planted in Colombia at the end of last year - just 8,000 hectares less than Colombia had in 1999, the year before Plan Colombia began. This is statistically about the same as the 113,850 hectares measured in 2003. The statistics of coca cultivation in hectares 1999-2004 are as follows:

⁸ See the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Fifty-eighth Session transcripts, 18 March - 26 April 2002.

Year	Total coca cultivation	Fumigation	Coca left over
1999	165,746	43,246	122,500
2000	183,571	47,371	136,200
2001	254,051	84,251	169,800
2002	267,145	122,695	144,450
2003	246,667	132,817	113,850
2004	250,555	136,555	114,000 ⁹

At the same time, the total amount of Colombian land estimated to be under coca cultivation - combining what was fumigated and what was "left over" - is near all-time high levels, increasing from 165,746 in 1999 to 250,555 in 2004. The more hectares fumigated, the more that are cultivated. There are many reasons for this increase, one of the primary reasons is an effect of the US's change in policy following September 11 is that resources, both Colombian and American, and time have been diverted from exclusively anti-drug activities to a more global anti-terrorism agenda. As troops have been stationed to train counterinsurgency battalions and have been sent to guard the oil pipeline, they have been taken directly from the ranks of those fighting the war on drugs. Critics have charged that this has forced U.S. taxpayers to provide security for the private company that manages the pipeline, Occidental. Furthermore, as more troops have been reassigned to guard oil pipelines, a great deal of territory has been left unprotected and armed actors, all of whom who are often associated with drug trafficking, move in and operate unchecked. Meanwhile, although the level success of Plan Colombia can be debated, its success in fighting drugs has clearly fallen as a result of this diversion and expansion of mission. At the same time the overall number of US troops has doubled, the number of

⁹ State Department estimates

Colombian troops dedicated to the war on drugs has dropped. This, again, has been a direct result of the changes in US policy. The Colombian government's number one priority has always been the establishment of law and order, which primarily involves counterinsurgency activities and the protection of government assets. While the Colombian government is certainly concerned with the cultivation and flow of drugs, since it affects their economy and social fabric substantially, the main priority for the coming years has always been the fight against the guerrillas and the security of the country.

It is difficult to isolate the changes in US policy after September 11 and assess their impact on drug trafficking in Colombia, since so much has changed in Colombia in the past four years. A new, more security-focused president has been elected, Plan Colombia has continued, and the political and economic health of Colombia's neighbors has changed. However, the changes in US aid have had a definite impact. It is clear that in the battle between Washington's traditional priority in Colombia, drugs, and Colombia's priority, security, Colombia has won. However, it is impossible to disengage drugs and security, and both countries have recognized this. It is essential that the goal of US policy be clarified, because at the moment the traditional "war on drugs" rhetoric is only built upon in framing the war on terror. This leads to a confused and incomplete US policy toward the country that is not having a substantial amount of success in fighting drugs or the insurgency. As much as Plan Colombia has been criticized, one of its strengths was a clear, anti-drug mission. With these new modifications allowing the anti-terror agenda to piggyback on the established anti-drug agenda, both the war on drugs and the war on terror in Colombia will suffer. With the declining emphasis on coca cultivation and drug trafficking in terms of US aid, and with the increase in security assistance couched in terms of

anti-terrorism aid, it is likely that we will see an increase in cocaine coming out of Colombia, and a continuing increase in the combined number of hectares fumigated and under cultivation.

If the US government's mission in Colombia is to reduce the cultivation of coca and the flow of drugs into the US, it would be wise to consider alternatives to fumigation and militarization of the war on drugs while refocusing aid on counter-narcotics assistance. If the objective in Colombia is to protect the American populace from Colombian terrorism, the degree of threat should be reanalyzed, as it is unlikely that the FARC, ELN, or AUC will pose a real threat to the US in the coming years. Finally, if the objective is to restore rule or law and eradicate three terrorist organizations, the remnants of the war on drugs should be eliminated and the aid should be refocused exclusively to combat terrorism. If this happens, the US government should carefully analyze the extent to which it can and should involve itself in Colombia's battle with the various armed actors in its territory.

The central thesis of this paper is that the events of September 11 and the ensuing changes in US policy and assistance to Colombia will increase the flow of drugs out of the country in the coming years. This increase will be due in part to the diversion of US anti-drug money toward security or anti-terrorism purposes and in part due to regional shifts in political and economic climate. That is not to say that Plan Colombia was an objective success before September 11, but a diversion of the focus on drug cultivation into the many other layers of problems facing Colombia that, quite frankly, have little to do with the kind of terrorism the US is trying to combat, will do nothing to reduce the cultivation of coca in Colombia or the flow of drugs into the United States.

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