LOCAL AND REGIONAL EFFECTS OF THE U.S. “WAR ON DRUGS”
IN COLOMBIA

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Introduction

During the past several years, U.S. foreign policy in Colombia has undergone significant transformations. In a relatively short period of time, Colombia’s status vis-a-vis the United States shifted dramatically: long-considered a faithful “ally” in the fight against drugs, as well as “showcasing” Washington’s achievements in this camp, the country became widely identified as an international “pariah” during the administration of Ernesto Samper (1994-1998), given the narco-scandal surrounding the Colombian president’s election. Although the inauguration of the Pastrana government in 1998 marked the official return to “friendly” relations with the United States, today Colombia is considered a “problem” nation whose spillover effects threaten to generate instability on a regional level.

In this paper, the implications of U.S. policy in Colombia in a number of issue-areas, including counterinsurgency, human rights, state weakening and regional security dynamics are explored. Given the centrality of counternarcotics activities to United States foreign policy in Colombia, I examine the underlying assumptions driving U.S. strategies to address this problem. Specifically, I argue that the “drug war” is largely the product of a realist worldview that tends to interpret the drug problem through the lense of national

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1 Significant portions of this paper were presented previously at the Conference, “Democracy, Human Rights and Peace in Colombia”, Notre Dame University, March 26-27, 2001.
security, leading to the use of coercive diplomatic measures designed to elicit cooperation on the part of host countries. In subsequent sections, I analyze the issues highlighted, primarily in relation to U.S. counternarcotics imperatives in Colombia. In a concluding section I challenge the utility of exploring Andean regional security dynamics exclusively in terms of the U.S. role and the Colombian crisis, while sketching out an alternative conceptual framework for approaching this problem.

The “Realist” Approach to Counternarcotics

Given the centrality of drug diplomacy to U.S.-Colombian relations, a comprehensive analysis of the implications of U.S. antinarcotics strategies in other policy areas such as counterinsurgency, militarization, human rights, democracy and state-building in Colombia must necessarily begin with a brief discussion of the conceptual assumptions underlying the “war on drugs”, as well as the stated national interests at stake in the United States.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the drug traffic began to occupy a more important place on the United States’ domestic and external agenda, given the significant increase in domestic consumption of illegal substances, as well as the growth in crime figures associated with the use of drugs.² Notwithstanding minor variations in the anti-drug policies adopted during the Reagan (1981-1989), Bush (1989-1993) and Clinton (1993-
2001) administrations, the underlying rationale has remained virtually intact (Tokatlian 1995: 119). In April 1986, President Ronald Reagan, through National Security Decision Directive 221, declared that illicit drugs constituted a lethal threat to U.S. national security. Directive 221 led to the increased involvement of the armed forces in the “war on drugs”, and the consequent militarization of U.S. anti-drug strategy. Concomitantly, supply-side actions such as interdiction, crop fumigation and eradication, and demand-side policies based upon the penalization of the traffic, distribution and consumption of narcotics, began to receive greater priority than rehabilitation and education-based strategies (Bagley 1988; Perl 1988; Pardo and Tickner 2000).

During the Bush administration, the military components of the “war on drugs” were intensified through the Andean Initiative. This initiative also expanded and shifted U.S. counternarcotics activities towards drug interdiction in the coca-producing Andean countries (Bagley 1992; WOLA 1993). In response to what he considered to be an inherent weakness of U.S. counternarcotics policy, Bill Clinton, in his 1992 presidential campaign, pledged to refocus the country’s efforts upon demand-based strategies. In early 1993, an exhaustive review of U.S. anti-drug strategies conducted by the Clinton administration confirmed suspicions that the Andean Initiative had been largely unsuccessful in curbing the availability of illegal substances in the United States (Crandall 2000). As a result, drug-related assistance for the Andean region was both reduced dramatically, and reoriented towards a “source country” strategy based mainly upon crop eradication rather than interdiction. The staff of the Office of National Drug Control Policy

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2 Nevertheless, the process of association of the drug issue with the notion of “threat” began much earlier. For instance, during the 1970s, President Richard Nixon declared that the abuse of illegal substances
(ONDCP) was also diminished from 146 to only 25 individuals. Nonetheless, the 1994 mid-term elections in the United States led to Republican party control of both houses of the Congress, and Clinton’s “soft-line” approach to drugs became increasingly criticized. The Clinton administration subsequently intensified and hardened its anti-drug strategy in response to such Congressional pressure. In October 1998, in fact, the U.S. Congress approved the Western Hemisphere Drug Elimination Act, through which public spending for drug interdiction and eradication efforts was substantially increased.

Bruce Bagley and Juan G. Tokatlian (1992: 216) sustain that U.S. drug control strategies have evolved within the framework of the realist tradition in international relations. This tradition highlights: (1) the predominance of the state, conceived as a unitary, rational actor; (2) the existence of anarchy, understood as the absence of a single source of authority in the international system, and thus, the need for states to recur to self-help tactics; (3) the stratification of international objectives between “high” politics (considered to be those pertaining to the strategic-military realm) and “low” politics; and (4) the strict separation between domestic and international politics (Vásquez 1991: 49-55).

From a purely realist perspective, the drug problem would most likely not be considered a significant policy issue in terms of the strategic global interests of the United States. Nevertheless, on a policy implementation level, one could argue that realism, observed more loosely as a “worldview” that has guided U.S. foreign policy, constitutes an ideological framework (resembling realpolitik) that has informed policy-making circles in constituted a “national emergency”, and called for a “full offensive” against this plague.
the formulation of counternarcotics strategies.\textsuperscript{3} The realist “worldview” predisposes policymakers, and the public at large, to view drug trafficking primarily as an “external” threat to national security, more than a “domestic” problem.

According to David Campbell (1992: 210),

An important dimension of the ‘war on drugs’ is thus the portrayal – in a manner that replicates almost exactly the formulations of the Soviet threat in the early 1950s – of drugs’ danger to the ethical boundaries of identity in terms of a threat to the territorial borders and sovereignty of the state.

With the end of the Cold War, the United States lost its most significant “other”, the Soviet Union (Huntington 1997: 32), with which a clear notion of the U.S. national interest declined as well. As a result, drugs, long considered a “threat” to U.S. values and society, became an obvious target for accommodating Cold War anti-communist language to the new, “drug-war discourse”. Viewed in this light, the “threat” represented by illegal drugs in the United States is not an objective condition; rather, narcotics constitute one of the “cognitive enemies” against which U.S. national identity has attempted to rebuild, albeit only partially, following the end of the Cold War. In this sense, drugs “endanger” the U.S. way of life and social fabric, in the same way that the communist threat challenged that countries’ values during the bipolar conflict.

\textsuperscript{3} See Ashley (1987) and DerDerian (1992) for a discussion of the ways in which realist theory permeates common understandings of the world shared by a wide range of social actors, including policy-makers and the
The drug problem also challenges two foundational myths of U.S. foreign policy: “(1) the United States has a special responsibility to lead the world in efforts at moral renewal, and (2) the interests of the United States are the interests of mankind” (Coleman 1980: 105). Given the sense of moral superiority that has traditionally characterized U.S. relations with the rest of the world, drug consumption is more easily understood as being prompted by availability, concentrated unsurprisingly in the countries of the periphery, rather than a problem originating in the demand for drugs in the United States, as well as the prohibitionist strategies that have traditionally characterized that country’s handling of this issue. While this rationale clearly runs contrary to common-sense economic rules of supply and demand, it tends to reinforce the underlying assumption of moral “purity” upon which the “American Creed” is in part based (Huntington 1989).

In light of the above considerations, U.S. anti-drug policies, based upon repressive, prohibitionist and hard-line language and strategies, become more comprehensible, given that they express the need to confront this “enemy” or “scourge” with determination. This leads to yet another underlying assumption of realist-inspired drug strategies, crucial to an understanding of how U.S. counternarcotics efforts ultimately tends to undermine progress in other policy areas: external pressure exerted by the United States, primarily through coercive diplomacy, is viewed as one of the most effective mechanisms for guaranteeing cooperation on the part of source countries, with which the interests and needs of drug-producing countries frequently acquire a secondary status (Friman 1993: 104).
In 1989, 63% of the U.S. population identified drugs as the most important problem being faced by that country (Bagley 1995: 10), with which the intensification of the “war on drugs” seemed somehow justified. By the mid-1990s, however, other types of issues began to replace drugs among the list of primary U.S. concerns. For instance, in 2000, only 5% of the population identified drugs as a significant problem, taking precedence domestic concerns such as education and taxes (The Gallup Organization 2000). Nevertheless, the drug problem continues to be a sensitive topic in U.S. domestic politics, as well as this country’s principal concern in its relations with Colombia. As such, regardless of the effectiveness of current strategies, all political actors are required to express determination in regards to the elimination of this “plague.”

In order to explain the importance of drugs in U.S. domestic and international politics, one must necessarily recur to the notion of “danger” and “threat” presented earlier. Although opinion polls indicate that the U.S. population is not overly concerned with this issue, and more importantly, even though the policies implemented by the United States have failed miserably in their attempts to reduce the availability of illegal substances in U.S. territory (GAO 1997: 3), drugs occupy an important discursive function in support of U.S. identities and values, and thus continue to be presented as a lethal threat to U.S. security. As a result, the political costs associated with directly challenging existing

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4 Notwithstanding the results of this poll, in a different poll conducted by the Democratic Party in September 1999, it was revealed that the public perceived drug use to be on the rise, and that a considerable number of the individuals polled believed that the Clinton administration had not done enough to confront this problem. The administration’s lack of determination in the “drug war” was thus seen as a potential weakness in the upcoming presidential elections. Interestingly, the poll was commissioned by Lockheed Martin, the U.S. manufacturer of radar planes used for drug interdiction, at a time in which both this company, as well as several helicopter manufacturers, were pressing for greater U.S. involvement in counternarcotics activities. See Isikoff and Vistica (2000: 14-15).
policies in the United States remain extremely high in comparison to the potential gains to be accrued by domestic actors in the public sphere.

The “War on Drugs” and Counterinsurgency

The ways in which the issue of illicit drugs has been addressed in Colombia derives substantially from the U.S. approach to this problem. Specifically, a great majority of measures adopted in the country to fight the drug trade have resulted largely from bilateral agreements subscribed with the United States, or the unilateral imposition of specific strategies designed in Washington. The implications of this type of antinarcotics strategy in a country such as Colombia are multifaceted. To begin with, the definition of the drug traffic as a matter of U.S. national security, and thus “high” politics, implies that drugs occupy a predominant place in U.S. foreign policy objectives in Colombia, to the exclusion of other longer term objectives, including the strengthening of democracy, the defense of human rights, the reduction of poverty and the preservation of the environment (Perl 1992: 28-29). Official rhetoric aside, “the sad reality is that U.S. policy towards Colombia is hostage to drug war politics in Washington” (WOLA 1997: 44).

In addition to underestimating the importance of other “low politics” objectives not directly related to the drug war, the militarization of counternarcotics activities has led to greater involvement of U.S. and local armed forces in the internal affairs of drug-producing

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countries. Following the end of the Cold War, and the peaceful settlement of armed conflict in Central America, the drug problem began to replace communism as the primary threat to U.S. national security in the Western Hemisphere. U.S. military assistance to Latin America, in consequence, became concentrated in the source countries, in particular Colombia. Concomitantly, the definition of “low-intensity conflict,” a concept commonly used to describe the political situation in Central America during the 1980s, was expanded to include the drug problem in those countries in which drug-trafficking organizations threatened the stability of the state (Corr and Miller 1992: 24). As such, one might argue that the strategies applied in the 1980s to confront other types of “low-intensity conflict” in the region were simply reaccommodated in the 1990s in order to address the “new” regional threat, drugs.

In Colombia, this view of the drug problem, and of the strategies needed to combat it, is especially troublesome, given that guerrilla groups, in particular the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), and paramilitaries maintain complex linkages with diverse aspects of the drug trade. On both a conceptual and practical level then, the U.S “war on drugs” has become nearly inseparable from counterinsurgency efforts in Colombia. Not surprisingly, “[t]hough couched within a counterdrug framework, the elements of Washington’s military aid program for Colombia are taken straight from the Pentagon’s counterinsurgency handbook for El Salvador” (Leogrande and Sharpe 2000: 6).

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6 In the mid-1990s, before U.S. military assistance to Colombia began to rise, government officials openly admitted that counternarcotics and counterinsurgency were essentially the same in the Colombian case. In fact, in an interview conducted by Human Rights Watch with Barry McCaffrey, then head of the U.S. Southern Command, McCaffrey conceded that these two facets constituted “two sides of the same coin” (Human Rights Watch 1996: 85).
The conflation of low-intensity counterinsurgency tactics with counternarcotics strategies has been facilitated primarily through the “narcoguerrilla theory” (Zirnite 1997: 7), and essentially represents an attempt to “render the drug war more intelligible on a traditional security register” (Campbell 1992: 212). This term was made popular in the 1980s by former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, Lewis Tambs.\(^7\) Notwithstanding the suspected links between guerrilla and drug trafficking organizations, the fact that paramilitary organizations, most notably MAS (Death to Kidnappers), were created in the early 1980s and financed by drug traffickers in retaliation for guerrilla kidnappings, seemed to belie the theory’s validity. By the mid-1990s, however, references to the “narcoguerrilla” slowly began to find their way into the official jargon of certain sectors of the U.S. and Colombian political (and military) establishment. Robert Gelbard, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, referred to the FARC as Colombia’s third largest drug cartel in 1996. During the Samper administration, the Colombian president himself began to use the narcoguerrilla label domestically in an attempt to discredit the FARC, given their unwillingness to negotiate with a political figure that the guerrilla organization considered illegitimate.\(^8\) In its relations with the United States, the Colombia also attempted to convince Washington that the symbiosis between guerrillas and drug-trafficking organizations was real, and that U.S. counternarcotics strategies needed to take this relationship into consideration.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Following the discovery of a sophisticated cocaine laboratory in the Caquetá Department, denominated Tranquilandia, Tambs accused the FARC of sustaining direct links with drug traffickers.
\(^8\) Personal interview with Ernesto Samper Pizano, Bogotá, September 4, 2000.
administration, the claim that the guerrillas were involved in the drug traffic was generally refuted by the United States government (Tamayo 2000).

Until quite recently, the United States had never categorically associated Colombian guerrilla organizations with the latter stages of the drug trafficking chain. In a press statement delivered by the U.S. Department of State on November 29, 2000, however, the FARC were directly accused of harboring relations with the Mexican organization *Arellano Félix*, one of the most powerful drug cartels in that country, while this governmental agency sustained that “since late 1999 the FARC has sought to establish a monopoly position over the commercialization of the cocaine base across much of southern Colombia” (U.S. Department of State 2000). One week later, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, Anne Patterson, affirmed that both the FARC and the paramilitaries had “control of the entire export process and the routes for sending drugs abroad” (Tamayo 2000), were operating as drug cartels in the country, and could thus be requested by the United States in extradition, given existing legislation.

In principle, the “narcoguerrilla theory,” as currently employed in Colombia, conveys the idea that: 1) the FARC control most aspects of the drug trade, given the demise of the major drug cartels in the mid-1990s; 2) the Colombian state is too weak to confront this threat, primarily due to the inefficacy of the country’s armed forces; and 3) U.S. military support is warranted, in order to wrest drug-producing regions, particularly in the south of the country, from guerrilla control. Although bearing a certain degree of truth,

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10 One day earlier, Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey also offered a news conference in which the FARC were accused of being involved in maritime shipments of drugs.
this description represents a gross simplification of the Colombian situation. For example, while a general consensus exists at present that the FARC derives a significant portion of its income from the taxation of coca crops and paste (Rangel 2000), there is widespread disagreement concerning the levels of involvement of the FARC in the transportation and distribution of narcotics. Contrary to the claims made by some U.S. government officials, Klaus Nyholm, Director of the UN Drug Control Program in Colombia, has sustained that “we have seen no evidence yet that the FARC is directly involved in cocaine production and export” (Collier 2000a: A1). In testimony provided to the U.S. Senate, the Director of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Donnie Marshall, in fact confirmed that there is no conclusive proof indicating that the FARC are currently operating as an international drug cartel (El Tiempo 2001: 1-2).

The growing involvement of the paramilitaries in drug-related activities clouds this picture even further. According to some sources, paramilitary expansion in Southern Colombia during latter months of 2000, in particular the Putumayo region, where the “Push into Southern Colombia” is currently concentrated, was largely financed by drug trafficking organizations, in response to FARC-imposed increases in the price and taxation of coca paste (Collier 2000b: A11). This is not surprising, in light of the fact that the leader of Colombian’s main paramilitary organization (the United Self-Defense Force of Colombia, AUC), Carlos Castaño, personally acknowledged in a televised interview in March 2000 that a large percentage of the AUC’s revenues in the departments of Antioquia and Córdoba are also derived from the drug trade.
Taken together, the above observations constitute only a few examples of the dangers involved in making sweeping generalizations in the Colombian case. Even so, the “narcoguerrilla theory” seems to have increasingly informed some U.S. political and military actors in the search for policy options in the country, while also lending credence to those who argue that counterinsurgency techniques used in other low-intensity conflicts can be used successfully in Colombia. Although the concrete political implications of this shift are still unclear, several general observations are in order. First, growing U.S. identification of armed actors, in particular the FARC, as criminal drug trafficking organizations could further weaken U.S. support for the Colombian peace process, as could the fact that the highest growth in coca cultivations during the past year took place in the FARC-controlled demilitarized zone (El Tiempo 2001: 1-2).

Second, the fine-line that the United States has attempted to draw between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency, in order to justify dramatic increases in military support for the Colombian armed forces, has worn noticeably thin. Tellingly, U.S. Representative Benjamin A. Gilman, in a letter written to Barry McCaffrey in November 2000 criticizing the militarization of counternarcotics activities in Colombia, suggested the need for public debate concerning counter-insurgency aid to the country: “I have no doubt that after such a public debate, the U.S. would commit to help the Colombian military in its counterinsurgency struggle.” General Peter Pace, head of the U.S. Southern Command, also acknowledged that “it is clearly true that many of the guerrillas, if not all, traffic in drugs, so trying to define that line is very difficult” (Kotler 2000). This tendency seems to have gained adherents during the first seven months of the Bush administration and was recently reflected in a RAND Corporation report on Colombia that questioned the
soundness of excluding counterinsurgency as an explicit objective of U.S. policy in Colombia (Rabasa and Chalk 2001).

While this shift would arguably “clarify” the nature of United States involvement in the country by eliminating the drug factor from policy calculations, the lessons learned from counterinsurgency efforts in other latitudes, in particular El Salvador, point towards their propensity to increase levels of violence and conflict, as well as their incapacity to offer lasting solutions to the host country’s problems.11

**Militarization and Human Rights**

This latter question of the precise nature of U.S. involvement in the Colombian conflict points to one of the most severe challenges to United States policy at present, derived from the human rights situation in this country. According to the U.S. State Department *Report on Human Rights* for 2000, political and extrajudicial actions involving government security forces, paramilitary groups and members of the guerrillas resulted in the death of 4,000 civilians; paramilitary forces were responsible for approximately three-quarters of these deaths. During the first six months of 2000, 235 massacres occurred, in which an estimated 1,073 persons were killed. As many as 317,000 persons were forced to leave their homes, while the total number of persons displaced by rural violence in the country during only the last five years ascended to approximately one million. 25,660 homicides were committed, one of the highest global figures per capita, and approximately

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3,700 civilians were kidnapped (compared with 3,200 in 1999), by far the highest rate in the world.

While Colombian security forces were responsible for only three to five percent of human rights violations in 2000 (a notable improvement over the 54 percent share in 1993), the report points out that government security forces continued to commit abuses, including extrajudicial killings, and to collaborate both directly and indirectly with paramilitary forces (U.S. Department of State 2001: 2). Notwithstanding efforts undertaken by the Colombian government to strengthen its human rights policy, and to combat the expansion of paramilitarism in the country, the results of the period under examination are rather poor. A recent report by Human Rights Watch (2000: 4) sustains that half of Colombia’s eighteen army brigades continue to be connected in some way to paramilitary activity. In turn, paramilitary forces increased their social and political base of support among civilian elites, in particular, in many parts of the country (U.S. Department of State 2001: 2).

For reasons related to the Colombian armed forces questionable human rights record, as well as the Colombian government’s unwillingness to denounce this situation publicly, U.S. military assistance to the country was severely limited during a large portion of the 1990s. Nevertheless, during this period the U.S. continued to provide the armed forces with military training, weapons and materials. In 1994, the U.S. Embassy in Colombia reported that counternarcotics aid had been provided in 1992 and 1993 to several units responsible for human rights violations in areas not considered to be priority drug-producing zones (Human Rights Watch 1996). As a result, beginning in 1994 the U.S. Congress anchored military aid in Colombia directly to anti-drug activities. In turn, the
Leahy Amendment of September 1996 sought to suspend military assistance to those units implicated in human rights violations that were receiving counternarcotics funding, unless the Secretary of State certified that the respective government was taking measures to bring responsible military officers to trial. Notwithstanding the restrictions that applied to the Colombian armed forces, in September 1996 the Clinton administration announced the decision to sell US$169 million in military equipment to the Colombian Army, including twelve Black Hawk helicopters. Commercial arms sales to Colombia also began to increase substantially during this same year (Human Rights Watch 1996: 85). Existing U.S. legislation lacks concrete measures for overseeing the actual use of equipment sold abroad in both types of transactions.

In 1994, during the Samper administration (1994-1998), the Colombian government began to adopt a stronger stance *vis-à-vis* the issue of human rights. In January 1995, for the first time ever the Colombian president publicly acknowledged the responsibility of the state in what became known as the Trujillo massacres, which resulted in over 100 assassinations at the hands of government security forces in collaboration with the hired-hands of the country’s drug trafficking organizations. Other measures directly sponsored by the Samper government in this area included the creation of a permanent office of the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights; the ratification of Protocol II of the Geneva Convention; and the formalization of an agreement with the International Red Cross that enabled this organization to establish its presence in the country’s conflict zones.\(^\text{12}\) Unfortunately, “Little by little, the novel proposals made at the beginning of the Samper

\(^{12}\) See Gallón (1997) for a more extensive discussion of Colombian human rights policy during the Samper administration.
administration became relegated to a secondary status, given the government’s need to maintain the support of the military in order to stay in power” (Semana 1997b: 31).

The moderate changes effected by the Colombian government in its handling of human rights issues, in combination with the intensification of the armed conflict and the changing military needs of the country’s armed forces, facilitated the signing of an agreement in August 1997 whereby the Colombian armed forces accepted the conditionality imposed by the Leahy amendment. In the past, the Colombian military had repeatedly refused U.S. military assistance on the grounds that such unilateral impositions “violated the dignity of the Army” (Semana 1997c: 44). Nevertheless, the marked asymmetries between U.S. aid earmarked for the Colombian National Police (CNP), which immediately accepted human rights conditionalities, and assistance designated for the Colombian Army in particular, constituted a strong incentive for the military to finally accept the conditions attached by the United States to further aid. In consequence, U.S. relations with the Colombian armed forces were normalized.

Beginning in 1997, U.S. military aid to Colombia skyrocketed. From approximately US$54 million that the United States government gave to Colombian security forces in 1996, U.S. aid rose to US$289 million in 1999. Between the years 2000 and 2001, the Colombian Army is to receive US$512 million, compared to US$123 million earmarked for the Police. Until the late 1990s, the Colombian National Police constituted, by far, Washington’s principal ally in the “war on drugs,” receiving nearly 90% of U.S. military aid for Colombia (Isacson 2000: 2). This was due in part to the involvement of the military in human rights violations, but was also closely related to the military’s reluctance
to participate more closely in a “war” that it considered to be of secondary importance, given the generalized climate of armed conflict in the country. The aid figures corresponding to the Colombian Army and the CNP in the 2000-2001 aid package, as well as the 2002 aid request presented by the Bush administration to Congress as part of the Andean Regional Initiative reverse this trend.

With the approval of the aid package corresponding to Plan Colombia in June 2000, the U.S. Congress specified that the President must certify that the armed forces are acting to suspend and prosecute those officers involved in human rights violations, and to enforce civilian court jurisdiction over human rights crimes, and that concrete measures are being taken to break the links that exist between the military and paramilitary groups. Nevertheless, the legislation gives the President the prerogative to waive this condition, if it is deemed that vital U.S. national interests are at stake. As a result, on August 22, 2000, several days before conducting his state visit to Colombia, President Clinton invoked the waiver. Notwithstanding the testimonies of several human rights organizations in early 2001, which pointed to the fact that little or no progress had been made in satisfying the human rights requirements contained in the aid package, Washington announced its decision to disburse the second portion in January, arguing that the legislation did not require another certification process (Mariner 2001).

Shifts in Colombian human rights policy, characterized by an a formal commitment on the part of both the government and the armed forces to denounce and punish human

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13 See Juan G. Tokatlian (1995: 33-55) for an evaluation of the military’s marginal role in counternarcotics activities in Colombia.
rights abuses committed by members of the military, have cleared the way for intensified military aid. Given current human rights restrictions associated with U.S. military assistance, however, it is clear that paramilitarism has been converted into an alternative, more “effective” means of combatting Colombian guerrilla movements (Reyes 1999: 5), and that violations once committed by government security forces have may have simply shifted toward paramilitary groups. Surely, this situation constitutes one of the largest “black holes” of U.S. policy toward Colombia at present. Both the Colombian military and paramilitary groups are combatting the same military target, although the latter have been much more successful in containing the territorial expansion of guerrilla movements within the country, given the sheer brutality of the methods they employ. Thus, the incentive for directly confronting the paramilitaries is largely absent, and is currently being provided by the United States through coercive diplomatic action, namely the provision/withholding of military assistance. Nevertheless, U.S. policy continues to be ambiguous in this area, as the use of the human rights waiver clearly testifies, and thus, coercive measures, although marginally effective, have failed to promote sweeping changes in Colombian human rights policies.

**U.S. Policy and State Weakening in Colombia**

Inherent to growing U.S. concern with the Colombian situation is the perception that the state has become “weak” in terms of its capacity to confront the domestic crisis and to

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14 Several high level military officials have been officially charged with participation, primarily through omission, in massacres occurring in the country, while in October 2000 the Colombian Ministry of Defense
maintain it within the country’s national boundaries. Thus, in addition to combatting the drug threat, and reducing human rights violations, another goal of current U.S. policy is to enable the Colombian military to reestablish territorial control over the country as a necessary step towards state-strengthening. Although it is widely accepted that state weakness has been a permanent aspect of Colombian political history, during the 1990s the progressive deterioration of the national situation acquired a spinning pace. In this section I will argue that the underriding logic of U.S. “drug war” imperatives has played a direct role in this process.

On the simplest and most obvious level, one could readily argue that the expansion and consolidation of drug trafficking organizations in Colombia during the 1980s was intimately related to the growth in U.S. domestic consumption of illegal substances, as well as the repressive policies traditionally applied to counteract this problem. Specifically, both the United States’ demand for drugs and its prohibitionist strategies created permissive external conditions in which the drug business in Colombia could flourish. The appearance of these organizations coincided with unprecedented levels of corruption in the public sphere, the growth in parallel forms of violence, and decreasing levels of state monopoly over the use of force.

The dismantling of the Medellín and Cali Cartels in the mid-1990s gave way to fundamentally different drug trafficking organizations that combined greater horizontal dispersion, kept a “low-profile” and had a more sophisticated strategy, which made them

\footnote{15 See Tokatlian (1995: 1-10) for a more extensive discussion of this topic.}
even more difficult to identify and capture (Contreras and Ambrus 2000). Part of the void created by the disappearance of these two cartels was filled by guerrilla (primarily the FARC) and paramilitary organizations, which became more directly involved in drug-related activities between 1994 and 1998. In consequence, one might also conclude that U.S. drug consumption, in tandem with the country’s counternarcotics strategies, have also exacerbated the Colombian armed conflict, providing diverse armed actors with substantial sources of income without which, arguably, their financial autonomy and territorial expansion might not have been as feasible.

The United States’ propensity to interpret the drug problem as a national security issue, in combination with the use of coercive diplomatic measures designed to effectively confront this threat, has forced the Colombian state to “securitize” its own anti-drugs strategy (Tokatlian 1995: 17-18), with which local problems, related primarily to social and economic development, have oftentimes become subordinate to Washington’s “war on drugs”. The underlying assumption of this “war”, inspired by a realist ideology, is that the use of external pressure is a crucial tool for achieving foreign policy objectives in this area, and that U.S. power is an enabling condition for the success of coercive diplomacy. U.S.-Colombian relations during the Samper administration, in particular, seem to confirm this fundamental belief, in the sense that President Samper “collaborated” much more vigorously with the United States than previous administrations. Nevertheless, realist-inspired counternarcotics efforts ignore the fact that policy orientations in source countries must necessarily answer to domestic as well as international exigencies (Friman 1993: 126). If domestic pressures are ignored on a systematic basis, growing state illegitimacy
and state weakness can result; in an already weak state, this strategy can accelerate processes of state collapse.

In the case of the Samper administration, the U.S. drug decertifications of 1996 and 1997, and the continuous threat of economic sanctions, combined with domestic pressures originating from President Samper’s lack of internal legitimacy to force the government to collaborate vigorously with the United States. Between 1994 and 1998 the Colombian government undertook an unprecedented fumigation campaign that shed impressive results in terms of total coca and poppy crop eradication. Nevertheless, coca cultivation mushroomed during this period. More significantly however, the fumigation campaign had tremendous repercussions in those portions of Southern Colombia where it was applied. In addition to provoking massive social protests in the departments of Putumayo, Caquetá, Cauca, and mostly, Guaviare, guerrilla involvement in the drug trade heightened during this period, and the FARC strengthened its social base of support among those peasants involved in coca cultivation (Vargas 1999). The absence of the Colombian state in this part of the country largely facilitated the assumption of para-state functions (administration of justice and security, among others) on the part of the guerrillas. Paramilitary activity also increased with the explicit goal of containing the guerrilla expansion. The end-result of this process was the strengthening of armed actors, and the intensification of the Colombian conflict. Although the United States was clearly not responsible for creating this situation, the excessive pressure placed upon the Samper government in order to achieve U.S. goals arguably made it worse.
According to Kalevi J. Holsti (1996: 95), the lack of external state legitimacy can exert a negative impact upon domestic legitimacy as well. In the case of U.S.-Colombian relations between 1994 and 1998, this was undoubtedly the case. Not only was the Colombian president himself ostracized by the United States, both domestically and internationally; increasingly, Colombia became identified as a pariah state within the international community. The political costs of the country’s reduced status on a global level were significant. During his entire rule, for example, Samper received only two official state visits to Colombia, by neighboring countries Venezuela and Ecuador. In turn, on an official tour through Africa and the Middle East in May 1997, the Colombian president was greeted in South Africa by news that President Mandela had been unable to meet him. Equally considerable were the economic costs of this situation.

Following growing evidence that the United States had in many ways aggravated Colombia’s domestic crisis, Washington became increasingly sensitive to the issue of state weakness, and attempted to develop a more “comprehensive” strategy toward the country when Andrés Pastrana took power in 1998. In part, this shift in U.S. policy explains the United States’ initial willingness to adopt a “wait-and-see” strategy regarding the peace process initiated with the FARC in early November 1998. Given the marked deterioration in the Colombian situation, it became difficult to ignore the clamors of an increasingly strong civil movement for a negotiated solution to the country’s armed conflict. Thus, during the first year of his government, Pastrana was able to effectively navigate between domestic pressures for peace and U.S. exigencies on the drug front. Nevertheless, the assassination of three U.S. citizens at the hands of the FARC in early March 1999 in combination with growing difficulties in the peace process itself, marked a turning point in
both the U.S. and the Colombian posture, and facilitated the ascendance of the “drug war” logic once again.

With the emergence of Plan Colombia in late 1999, as the direct result of the “renarcotization” of the bilateral agenda, the Colombian government was able to circumvent domestic pressures by manipulating information about its intentions vis-a-vis the United States. This was achieved mainly through the publication of distinct versions for public consumption (in both Colombia and Europe), in which peace (and not the “drug war”) was adeptly presented as the centerpiece of Plan Colombia’s strategy. Public governmental statements negating the strong emphasis placed upon the drug problem in the plan presented to the United States reinforced this idea. When the United States Congress approved the Colombian aid package in mid-2000, it became increasingly difficult to sustain this argument, primarily due to the strong military component (80% of the total) designated in the package for intensifying the “drug war”. Instead, the Pastrana government attempted to highlight the approximately US$200 million earmarked for initiatives related to alternative development, application of the law, assistance to displaced persons, human rights and democracy, while shying away from public debate concerning the significant weight attached to the military and counternarcotics aspects of the package.

Although this strategy of misrepresentation allowed the Colombian government an initial degree of leeway in dealing with domestic pressures, the ultimate costs of such a

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16 The two-level games approach to diplomacy highlights the fact that statesmen must usually respond to both domestic and international pressures surrounding specific issue-areas. When such pressures fail to coincide, statesmen must seek ways of reconciling them. The manipulation of information concerning specific agreements is one means of doing so. See Moravcsik (1993: 15-25).
policy have become considerably high in terms of their potential for aggravating already considerable levels of anti-government sentiment among certain sectors of the population. In mid-December 2000, for example, massive fumigation commenced in the Putumayo department. According to both U.S. and Colombian official sources, the implementation of this first phase of the coca crop eradication effort has shed impressive results in terms of the total number of acres fumigated, while a “historic opportunity” has been seized to target and destroy large coca plantations (Adams 2001). On a local level, however, the repercussions of this initiative have been much less positive. An exhaustive study conducted by Colombia’s National Human Rights Ombudsman indicates that fumigation activities affected legal food crops in areas in which crop substitution pacts with the government were already in place, in areas in which such pacts were in the process of being formalized, and in areas participating in alternative development projects financed by the Colombian government, the United Nations and Europe (Defensoría del Pueblo 2001).

Echoing this concern, those governors representing the six departments most affected by the implementation of Plan Colombia established an alliance in early 2001 in order to express their opposition to the military components of the Plan, as well as to criticize what they consider to be the displacement of the social needs of their respective departments by the exigencies of war (Rodríguez 2001: 17). On separate occasions in mid-2001, both the alliance of governors, and Colombian senators Juan Manuel Ospina and Rafael Orduz have traveled to Washington in order to publicize the health risks of aerial fumigation as it is currently being applied in Southern Colombia. Such actions have been accompanied by a series of organized protests in Colombia that seek to put an end to this practice. It is also expected that the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee will determine
that the aerial fumigation portion of the 2002 aid bill to the Andean region should be frozen until the Department of State certifies that the drug eradication strategies currently employed in Colombia do not pose significant public health problems (Center for International Policy 2001).

**Regional (In)Security: Towards a New Conceptual Framework**

In addition to the issues that I have highlighted above, the implications of the Colombian crisis for regional (in)security are also intimately related to the U.S. role and policies, in particular in the area of counternarcotics. During the past two years Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil have taken measures to protect their borders, in response to fears that the Colombian armed conflict, in combination with intensified U.S. military involvement, are producing spillover effects. Clearly, such concerns are not unfounded. In Venezuela, the kidnapping and extortion of inhabitants of the Colombian-Venezuelan border has become a common occurrence. Kidnappings, guerrilla and paramilitary incursions, and the flow of displaced persons from Southern Colombia into Ecuador have accentuated the permeable nature of that country’s border with its Colombian neighbor. Following the withdrawal of the United States from the Panama Canal Zone, the presence of armed actors in the Darien region, as well as the flow of drugs and arms, has also produced increasing alarm (Rabasa and Chalk 2001: 35).

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17 The considerations put forth in this section are derived from a research project, “The Andean Region Security Complex,” that is being funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) as part of its Grants
U.S. interpretations of the problem have consequently shifted towards a more “regionalized” approach, as evidenced by the Bush administration’s “Andean Regional Initiative” aid proposal for 2002, through which Colombia’s neighbors would stand to receive significantly more aid, primarily for drug interdiction (Center for International Policy 2001). Notwithstanding the regional flavor of this most recent proposal, Colombia continues to be portrayed as the epicenter of hemispheric instability. Echoing this widely shared view, a recent RAND Corporation reports that

There has already been significant spillover of the armed conflict in Colombia. The contraction of the Colombian government’s authority has facilitated the spread of guerrilla, paramilitary, and drug-trafficking activities to neighboring states (Rabasa and Chalk 2001: 85).

Although focusing on how the internal crisis in Colombia jeopardizes both its own security as well as that of neighboring countries certainly constitutes an import part of the story, such an approach overlooks the complex, relational nature of current security dynamics in the Andean region. In other words, Colombia’s acute, high profile crisis has impeded the consideration of other factors that also pose significant risks to regional security. This situation calls for a more holistic, interdependent approach to the security issue within the Andean region.
According to Barry Buzan (1991), a comprehensive analysis of security problems in the post-Cold War global order requires that regional dynamics be taken into consideration. The Andean region warrants analysis as a distinct unit, or “security complex”, not only due to the geographical proximity of its members, but also because the primary security concerns of the Andean countries are so highly interdependent that their respective definitions of national security, national interests and fear necessarily involve each other (Buzan 1991: 190). In addition, the region is increasingly characterized by a particular set of security imperatives that are shared across individual states and that distinguish this subsystem from the Southern Cone and Brazil. This regional level of analysis is particularly well-suited to reflect the changing parameters of security away from the territorial, national based concerns upon which strategies in the Andes presently rest.

In the Andean region, a series of threats that affect regional security dynamics are discernable: (1) the Colombian crisis; (2) U.S. policies toward the region; (3) the illegal drug and arms traffic; (4) the increasing weakness of regional states and the deconsolidation of democracy; and (5) economic downturn. The externalities imposed by the Colombian armed conflict have been extensively documented, and include the displacement of sectors of the Colombian population fleeing from violence, the potential transferral of drug crops to new areas not subjected to aerial fumigation, the operation of guerrilla and paramilitary groups in the border regions, the kidnapping of individuals on foreign soil and increasing militarization of neighboring country borders.

Increased U.S. military presence in Colombia (and Ecuador, following an agreement facilitating the use of the Manta airforce base as a forward operating location (FOL) for
anti-drug reconnaissance missions) has had the effect of subordinating local security patterns to the security imperatives of the United States. This situation, described by Buzan (1991: 198) as “overlay,” occurs when the “[...] direct presence of outside powers in a region is strong enough to suppress the normal operation of security dynamics among the local states.” The effects of overlay are multifaceted (Buzan 1991: 198-208): (1) in addition to aggravating local tensions, the imposition of U.S. national security imperatives over local concerns supresses the identification of shared regional interests, with which collective action becomes difficult; (2) the high levels of interdependence that underly the drug issue as a common problem faced by the Andean region have given way to the increasing identification of Colombia as the sole depository of this problem; (3) “zero-sum” competition is encouraged, in the sense that Colombia’s neighbors perceive the “relative gains” accrued by this country in terms of U.S. aid and the fight against drugs as a potential loss for themselves; and (4) costs are generated in terms of the entanglement of the regional security complex in a larger security dynamic, created primarily by the U.S. “drug war” logic.

A major portion of the cultivation, processing and trafficking of illicit drugs are concentrated in the Andean countries (primarily Colombia), while illegal arms flows traverse the region. The effects of both black markets in terms of their capacity for increasing corruption and undermining governmental authority are well-known. Although Colombian armed actors purchase weapons from a wide array of international sources, in mid-2000 alone arms confiscated from the FARC were associated with the Venezuelan military and the Peruvian government, which had in turn purchased them from Jordan (Rabasa and Chalk 2001: 35-37). The August 2001 arrest of three IRA members allegedly
in Colombia to train the FARC in urban warfare strategies highlights the complexities of this situation even further, while tentatively challenging the supposedly distinctive nature of the illegal drug and arms markets on a global level.

Since the early 1990s, all of the Andean nations have undergone varying degrees of weakening of state structures, and of the efficacy and credibility of their political institutions, compounded even further by chronic economic downturns and crises. One result of the lack of legitimacy characteristic of weak states is what Brian L. Job (1992: 17-18) describes as the “insecurity dilemma”: given the highly contested nature of the state, the notion of “threat” is derived primarily from domestic threats to the state’s own existence. The state’s instinct for self-preservation reduces its institutional capacity to provide security and well-being for the population at large, leading to the increased vulnerability of society as a whole. The lack of state control over the domestic environment also makes weak states in the Andes increasingly permeable to international pressures, which can in turn exacerbate problems existing on the local and regional levels (Ayoob 1991: 65). In combination with the effects of “overlay”, the “insecurity dilemma” largely explains why the Andean countries themselves have been quick to identify Colombia as the primary threat to their own security.

All of these factors are highly interdependent and mutually reinforcing, resulting in a rapidly deteriorating regional situation. Taken together, they present a significant challenge to a comprehensive understanding of regional security dynamics. In this sense, the one-dimensional view of Andean security that is currently shared by both practitioners and scholars, in which Colombia has been targetted as the central “problem,” may indeed
constitute an obstacle to the creation of alternative, more encompassing approaches to the security problematic in the region.

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