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Buy Off and Buy In: Flipping the FARC

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Abstract

The election of President Juan Manuel Santos in Columbia marks a new era in Columbian security policy. Instead of focusing on a solely military solution to conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), as his predecessor did, Santos has committed to a multifaceted effort to resolve the dispute. In spite of this hope, the Santos administration has failed to implement many critical non-military policy proposals. Like Santos, the scholarly community has ignored important comparative studies of counterterrorism. This essay attempts to fill a gap in the literature by framing a discussion of the FARC in light of new advances in counterinsurgency studies. While the field has progressed in its conceptions of insurgency in light of the rise and success of al-Qaida, lessons learned here have not sufficiently spread to other networks. Scholarship in the last decade has revealed that negotiating with insurgent networks is best done in nimble and discreet ways, not in black and white. This paper pools new knowledge on the topic of counterinsurgency and applies it to the dynamic conflict in Colombia. A comparative analysis of the historical demise of insurgent networks, combined with important lessons learned in the War on Terror, will add theoretical weight to current policy proposals, as well as generate new recommendations for Colombian strategic security.

Introduction

While the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been substantially crippled by ongoing military campaigns, 10,000 FARC forces remain well-positioned in key geographic areas throughout Colombia. Because of scarce resources and lack of personnel, the Colombian military is not capable of seizing and holding the remaining sixty fronts or 7,500 square miles of FARC territory.¹ Even the most aggressive push of 13,000 Colombian forces in 2002 could only wrestle away half of the populated territory from the rebels. Jungle hideaways provide a cover for increased illicit activity, paralleling U.S. problems in eliminating al-Qaida and the Taliban in the mountains of Afghanistan. Indeed, while the FARC lost 50 percent of its land between 2002 and 2010, in 2009 many regions saw an increase in violence.² While the FARC is certainly fractured and immobilized, continuing military-centric policies are highly unlikely to permanently eliminate the insurgent threat. The most salient question for Colombia remains how to eliminate the FARC once and for all.

The 2010 election of Juan Manuel Santos thus marks a defining moment for the future of Colombian security. Throughout the presidential campaign, Santos indicated that he was willing to negotiate with FARC rebels and implement a "multifaceted approach," but as of this writing, he has yet to meaningfully do so. This paper presents a skeleton of what this comprehensive negotiating strategy should look like, emphasizing non-military solutions. This agenda proceeds in four sections.

The first section takes cues from recent trends in comparative counterinsurgency studies and provides two theoretical lenses for studying the FARC, borrowing from lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Section Two uses these theoretical foundations to identify the fractures and shifts that are occurring in the movement. Section Three creates a strategic framework that exploits the FARC's fractures and capitalizes upon weakness. From this framework, the fourth section outlines specific recommendations for both the Santos and Obama administrations.

New Theories to an Old Conflict

The scholarly community has not gone far enough to offer policy solutions for Colombia based upon lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are two key areas of scholarship that can inform a new security strategy in Colombia. First, Colombia needs to take seriously how other organizations like the FARC have ended. Comparative counterinsurgency scholars offer robust descriptive and explanatory tools from which Colombia can

take strategic cues.³ Following in the footsteps of comparative terror scholar David Rapoport, Audrey Kurth Cronin offers a particularly compelling study of *The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups*.⁴ According to Cronin:

"[T]here are at least seven broad explanations for, or critical elements in, the decline and ending of terrorist groups in the modern era: (1) capture or killing of the leader, (2) failure to transition to the next generation, (3) achievement of the group's aims, (4) transition to a legitimate political process, (5) undermining of popular support, (6) repression, and (7) transition from terrorism to other forms of violence."⁵

Cronin's seven-scenario model provides a key theoretical lens for evaluating how the FARC can end once and for all. Clearly the FARC has made the transition to other forms of illicit activity (trafficking, kidnapping, extortion) and in doing so has lost legitimacy with the public. Capitalizing on these two weaknesses is key to bringing about a third path of demise—transitioning to a legitimate political organization.

Secondly, in the past decade, new non-military tactics have been successful in Iraq and Afghanistan. Colombia needs to apply these lessons to the FARC. In complement to Cronin's theory on how terrorist groups end, Fotini Christia and Michael Semple's 2009 piece "Flipping the Taliban" offers a particularly compelling argument to end the insurgency in Afghanistan, based on the successes of flipping the allegiance of Iraqi Sunni militias: U.S. forces should concentrate less on killing insurgents and more on stimulating their defection from Taliban ranks.⁶ Reconciliation, integration, and providing for the survival strategies of local populations go a long way toward facilitating an individual fighter's flip from Taliban to coalition forces. In essence, "winning the hearts and minds" of fighters starts with banal material provisions like a paycheck, a pillow, and bread.

Colombia can formulate a new strategy by understanding how insurgency groups end and by applying the specific non-military tactics used in Iraq and Afghanistan. The next section utilizes Cronin's, Christia's, and Semple's theoretical models to describe the weaknesses of the FARC and highlight potential openings for Colombia to "flip" the FARC.

Fractures and Shifts

While beginning as a Marxist-Leninist insurgency, there are key signs that the FARC has transitioned from an ideological organization to one principally concerned with practical matters. After the initial success of the organization in the late 1970s, it became clear that supporting a growing, extensive insurgent apparatus, at that time operating on dozens of fronts, required financial stability. The 1982 Seventh Guerrilla Conference crystallized a new strategy for the FARC that explicitly endorsed coca cultivation as a major source of revenue. This booming source of income bolstered the FARC's institutional capabilities in the short term, but eventually became a source of confusion and internal conflict. The FARC initially gained income by merely levying taxes on coca farmers in the regions under the group's control. However, witnessing the revenue potential from the cultivation, production, exportation, and direct sale of cocaine led the FARC to take over the entire production chain.⁷ Thirty years after the Seventh Guerilla Conference, the FARC now yields up to \$1 billion dollars annually from its illicit activities.⁸

The shift from ideologically-driven insurgency to drug cartel has significantly impacted the FARC's image. Both the rank and file and the public at large have felt betrayed by the leadership of the FARC, who display their lavish lifestyles with "fancy sport utility vehicles, high class military equipment, and cash."⁹ This is in direct contrast to the fact that the FARC does not pay its foot soldiers, but rather provides for their food, shelter, equipment, and other survival strategies through the Financial Commission, which serves as the "central clearinghouse for the FARC's revenues."¹⁰ Instead of payment, the FARC relies upon morale. The social mobility and comradeship offered by the militant lifestyle are key recruitment points for new members, but financial stability is clearly not. Deserters regularly report that economic hardship encouraged them to leave the organization.¹¹ This economic hardship is furthered by a severe sense of lost purpose for the collective FARC project. The disconnect between leadership and foot soldiers has never been greater. The transition from an insurgency to a cartel has created a potentially fatal divide in the organization, on which the Santos administration can capitalize.

A disconnect is also occurring between the FARC and the public at large. Since the emphasis to invest in coca cultivation in 1982, more than three million people have become political refugees in western and southern Colombia. As the FARC moved up the production chain and began targeting rival cartels and traffickers, it would often terrorize the local population into compliance by kidnapping young boys and staging public killings to serve as an example. The fight over coca farming land was, however,

bearable to the majority of the population because the FARC also provided state-like survival strategies for the locals. Building schools, wells, and providing some semblance of rule of law gave the FARC public legitimacy that helped sustain its growth. This relationship has significantly changed in recent years.

Instead of providing for local survival strategies, the FARC has grown more violent in its desperation to hold onto territory. After former President Álvaro Uribe's incremental military successes against the FARC, from 2002–2009, the rebels can no longer provide for the local populations that once supported them. Villages are once again relying upon the state to build schools and roads, and thus have no need to politically support an organization that has transitioned to a full-blown criminal cartel. Furthermore, in reaction to military defeats, recent analysis shows that the FARC has doubled-down on its reliance on coca by establishing ties to Mexican cartels. This trend will continue to undermine the legitimacy of the organization locally.

Because of its transition to illicit activity and loss of both internal and popular support, there are essentially two divergent factions of the FARC. On one hand, there are the "true believers"—those local peasants and unpaid foot-soldiers who still hold to the political identity of the FARC. The other FARC faction is deeply disconnected from the political aims of the organization, committed to drug profits, and is willing to continue targeting local populations in order to maintain that goal.

The Colombian Government can capitalize on these fractures in the FARC by looking deeper into Cronin's theory of how such organizations end. So far, the FARC has gone down two fatal paths described by Cronin: shifting to other illicit activity and losing popular support. But there is an additional fatal path down which the Santos administration can push the FARC. According to Cronin, "groups have transitioned to political legitimacy and away from terrorist behavior after the formal opening of a political process."¹² The current ideological/cartel split in the FARC offers a real opportunity to transform those "true believers" into a legitimate political organization. An open invitation for the FARC to join civil society would capitalize on many FARC members' desires to once again help build schools, pave roads, and increase the overall quality of life for their neighbors. In other words, there needs to be an opening for ideologically-defined FARC members to become identified as "patriotic" and not criminals. It is to this process that we turn next.

Rewarding Change and Building Capacity: Buy-Off, Buy-In

The Santos administration can "flip" remaining members of the FARC by offering alternatives to the drug cartel. As Christia and Semple suggest concerning the Taliban, the most strategic policy going forward is one that separates the "good" insurgents from the "bad." There are thousands of FARC members conscripted into the guerilla army who would be great assets in assisting in rebuilding civil society in war-torn areas. Two general strategies can assist in this process.

First, the Colombian Government should pursue a "buy-off" strategy. A key organizational difference between the right-wing paramilitaries and the left-wing FARC is financial incentive. On average, the paramilitary forces provide \$200–250 dollar monthly stipends to their recruits to maintain loyalty, whereas the FARC relies on unit cohesion and centralized provision of resources.¹³ Since cohesion among the FARC ranks is at an all-time low, now is the perfect time for the government to provide monetary incentives for defectors. The breakdown between the rank and file and the leadership indicates that long-term ideological convictions could be initially supplanted by short-term economic gains.

A comparable model has been successfully implemented in Iraq, where American forces actually paid Sunni militia members \$300 dollars a month to not fight. This plan is particularly workable when one crunches the numbers. In Iraq, about 100,000 Sunni gunmen were placed on the payroll, totaling \$30 million dollars a month. The number of active members of the FARC is far fewer, hovering around 10,000. Maintaining a \$300 dollar per person payroll (above average wages in Bogotá), the total cost of this plan would be about \$36 million dollars per year. Considering the cost of war, even cash-strapped Colombia would be able to implement this plan. If "the asperity of guerrilla life and unfulfilled economic promises rank high in the reasons for quitting" as the data suggest, this plan capitalizes on a principal weakness in the FARC organization.¹⁴

Second, the Colombian Government should pursue a "buy-in" strategy. Permanently flipping the FARC is far more nuanced than "paying the bills" and requires long-term investment by Bogotá. Once members of the FARC are persuaded to flip sides, a strategy needs to be in place to keep them there. Here one must hearken back to those non-monetary incentives that groups like the FARC offer fighters to begin with: comradeship, security, a livelihood, and respectability.¹⁵

One of the reasons the FARC has been successful in the past is because it actually offered social advantages that the government could not provide. Being a FARC member for many was a form of social activism, providing a sense of purpose previously unknown. Such meaning-creation occurred on the individual level, but also communally. In the early stages of the movement, when the FARC would take over a territory, their institutional structure was almost state-like. They provided public services, levied taxes, established educational services and health clinics—all social advances for previously ungoverned populations.¹⁶ Capacity-building activities like these provide building blocks of social cohesion and legitimacy, and create an identity that cannot just be bought off with a monthly paycheck.

Recent circumstances, however, have significantly limited the FARC's ability to continue providing these local resources. The Uribe military victories have substantially reduced the capability of the FARC to do anything other than fight. Military losses have forced leaders to choose between guns or butter—not both. The desire for self-preservation has forced the FARC to neglect those services that boost morale and provide incentive in the ranks. Additionally, the transition to cartel activity has put a bitter taste in the mouths of the guerillas originally recruited as "social activists." This divide has only grown as the FARC has become a narco-terror organization, climbing the ladder of production and distribution. Now, more than ever, members are seeing their ideology sacrificed by the very organization created to protect it.

The government can exploit this divide by empowering defecting FARC members with participation in public works projects. Local government leaders can create civil society councils for former FARC members to get involved in social activism, reawakening that sense of comradeship and respectability that they once received from FARC membership. Defecting FARC members must therefore be rewarded for the contributions they have made to civil society in the past. The Santos administration can allow those "patriotic" FARC members, who built schools and paved roads, to claim moral victory over their narco-terrorist counterparts. A process of this nature creates that virtuous cycle where the FARC actually becomes a legitimate political actor—a critical element of ending the FARC (as we know it) once and for all.

Recommendations

The Santos administration should pursue two general strategies to flip the FARC: Buy-Off and Buy-In. These strategies have been successful in Iraq and Afghanistan and are informed by extant literature on counterinsurgency and comparative terror organizations. Three specific policy recommendations emerge from these strategies.

First, Colombia needs to ask for United States help to offset the cost the "flip." Just as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States can provide financial assistance to pay FARC defectors. Compared to the investment Uncle Sam has already made in the region with Plan Colombia, \$36 million dollars a year is certainly reasonable enough. There are additional expenses associated with the buy-off strategy, of course. U.S. burden-sharing should also entail advising civilian officials on how to reintegrate former guerrillas back into the community. According to recent statistics, "most FARC deserters are impoverished young men and women with long rap sheets and few marketable skills. Once transferred to Bogotá and other big cities, they temporarily settle in government-run halfway houses where they can earn high school degrees and take part in job-training programs."¹⁷ Programs like these cost money and manpower and could be subsidized by Colombia's neighbors, the United States, or the Organization of American States (OAS).

Second, there is a policy bridge between the short-term buyoff and longer-term buy-in strategy. The Colombian Government should decentralize the economic incentives provided to FARC defectors and let local municipal governments take the lead on integration. This would encourage defectors to settle in those rural areas that desperately need civil society investment and manpower to build infrastructure. In addition to individual paychecks, the Santos administration should set aside national funds for local public works projects in which defectors can get involved, perhaps with extra monetary incentives attached. These types of programs "seal the deal" on short-term economic incentives and begin the process of reintegrating former guerillas in society where they can realize those non-economic benefits like respect, comradeship, and social value.

Third, it is time to invite the FARC to meaningfully participate in the political process. This will require sincere and committed negotiation. For instance, any new FARC party should be required to address issues like disarmament, land restitution, and re-territorialization for Afro-Colombian communities. While such issues will take time to settle politically, even having such conversations in the political sphere helps separate the ideological and political aims of FARC members from the

narco-terror tactics used by the organizational leadership. Creating a space for political negotiation is imperative for demarcating and rewarding the "flipped" FARC while simultaneously seeking out and destroying the narco-terror factions. Indeed, any sort of political opening will most likely speed the splintering of the organization between the true believers and the narco-terrorists. True believers will defect if there is a real possibility that their ideas will at least be heard in some sort of representative or deliberative assembly. Democratic participation, again at the local level, is also critical to capture the imaginations of the politically motivated FARC. The narco-terrorist faction will undoubtedly double down on their cartel economic model, which will provide a nice contrast for the public between the narocs and the politically legitimate or "patriotic" FARC members. Clearly, if FARC defectors can transition to a politically legitimate organization, they need not sacrifice their convictions in order to disassociate from the FARC cartel leadership. If done carefully, a political transition will seem a natural alternative to narco-terrorism.

A political transition for the FARC, however, would certainly have political connotations for Colombia internationally. Organizations like the OAS and donor countries like the United States will likely have knee-jerk reactions against a pseudo-Marxist party being legitimized by Santos. Tension of this sort can be mitigated by Colombia's welcoming more elections oversight, increasing international non-government organization (NGO) activity, and asking for monetary support for democratic institutions. The United States should offer advice and counsel during the transition period, but also understand that a cost-benefit national security paradigm clearly supports a political transition away from cartel activity.

Conclusion

There are efficient ways to build a foundation that is comprehensive and based on theories of comparative counterinsurgency developed from lessons learned in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the global war on terror. The Santos administration should engage the FARC on multiple, non-military levels. A concerted strategic effort to flip the FARC can be accomplished through a two-step approach of buy-off and buy-in. These strategic foundations are informed by key lessons learned in counterinsurgency studies since September 11, namely the importance of capitalizing on structural weaknesses in the organization. Three of Cronin's models for how terror groups end are applicable. First, the FARC has transitioned from a Marxist insurgency to a cartel organization. This, secondly, has undermined internal and external support, a critical factor in such a group's eventual

demise. Finally, Christia's and Semple's work on flipping the Taliban is useful for analyzing how to flip the FARC. The divide between the "true believers" and narco-terrorists in the FARC presents a unique opportunity to help transition the FARC to a legitimate political organization. The FARC will end as the Santos administration is able to provide short-term economic incentives and long-term integration into civil society.

About the Author

Joel Day is a Ph.D. student in the Korbel School of International Studies, focusing on ethnic self-determination and secessionist movements. His research agenda includes the study of third-party negotiation of state partition, the creation of new states in the international system, and implications of secession on U.S. national security and global stability. Joel was previously Director of Operations for The Fair Trade Fund, where he worked on a feature film addressing the international crime of human slavery (www.callandresponse.com). Joel has worked with two California Assembly Members, a number of Congressional campaigns, the County of San Diego, and a U.S. Presidential Campaign. Joel is also a three-time national debate champion and a recipient of the National Security Education Program Scholarship. Joel holds an M.A. in International Relations from the University of San Diego, and a B.A. in Political Science with an emphasis in peace studies from Point Loma Nazarene University. The author may be reached for comment at: joel.day@du.edu.

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