United States policies towards the Colombian armed conflict: implications of merging war and crime fighting

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Abstract: This work aims at discussing the blurring lines dividing war fighting and crime fighting. In the light of US policies towards the Colombian armed conflict, this work is developed according to two main axes. The first one is dedicated to the conceptual approaches articulated by US agencies in order to claim a direct link between war and crime in Colombia – namely, narcoguerrilla and narcoterrorist. This will allow for identifying which are the main players in the process of defining these concepts, as well as what they identify as a threat in the Colombian conflict. The second axis examines how these formulations triggered the development of mechanisms that have crystallized a particular form of cooperation between US Police and Armed Forces towards Colombia. Having Didier Bigo and Jef Huysmans as the main references, the underlying logic of this work is that the security policies that have been implemented by the US towards the Colombian armed conflict constitute a long term process, which does not operate within the logics of exceptional moments. Rather, these policies have been gradually designed, broadened and deepened and reflect a routine work of US agencies whose functions have been connected to the violence scenario observed in Colombia.

Key-words: security policies; Unites States; Colombia; terrorism; drugs
I. Framing the question

The multiple definitions of war emerged after the end of the Cold War aimed at challenging a traditional conception, whose terms have basically remained the same since Clausewitz (1832). In this conceptual mosaic that has been recently formed, it is possible to stand out the definition proposed by Kaldor (2007), who claimed a division between old wars – those which were proximate to Clausewitz’s formulations – and new ones – that is, “new ways of socially organizing violence” (2006, p. 32) through changes in the actors, techniques and counter-techniques involved in war fighting. Kaldor suggests that the dispute between the two superpowers during the Cold War obscured some new characteristics that were notable since the 1940s. Rent-seeking, strong links with criminal networks, violence against civilians were the main characteristic elements of these new wars (2006).

What interests here is that despite the conceptual disputes surrounding the word “war”, the latter has been systematically applied in order to set in motion violent practices. These practices have been structured upon the claim that war has indeed changed and therefore, it requires the development of new means. These “new means” can be addressed in multiple ways, but this work will focus in the blurring between military and police activities.

The divisive lines between these groups are intimately related to the nation-state and to its process of consolidation, not only because the states are the parties in conflict, but also because the role of the Armed Forces is emphasized in the definition. As Tilly (1990) defends, the process of state formation in Europe took place through violent confrontations which resulted in a central and territorially-based government which aimed at assuring peace inside, as well as the integrity of the boundaries which separated the outside from the inside. Thus, the consolidation process of the European nation-states involved a considerable degree of violence – “wars make states” – through which internal pacification was achieved, a central and territorialized sovereign was instituted and boundaries’ integrity were defended – “states make wars”. The division between inside and outside also marks the functional separation between Police and Armed Forces. Within the boundaries of this nation-state, the police was in charge of enforcing the law; while externally, the Armed
Forces were in charge of protecting the violation of the state’s boundaries. In other words, the police focused its work in crime fighting; while the Armed Forces, in war fighting. Contrastingly, according to the “new threats” discourse, this traditional formula does not fit the new context; therefore, the Armed Forces should not be the main interlocutor in addressing these challenges.

In the light of this context, this work aims at offering a modest contribution to the reflection on the sources and implications of the blurring lines dividing war fighting and crime fighting. This choice can be justified by the observation that many countries have redefined “their security interests more in terms of crime fighting than in terms of war fighting, and more in terms of law evasions than in terms of deterring military invasions” (Andreas; Price, 2001, p. 31).

The elements outlined above will be examined through the United States policies towards the Colombian conflict\(^1\). This case is believed to be pertinent to the analysis here proposed once the conflict in Colombia has gone through numerous transformations in terms of intensity, actors involved and, fundamentally, in nature. Put differently, it has been argued that the Colombian conflict has begun as an ideological conflict\(^2\) and, through its trajectory, the armed groups found in narcotraffic the resources needed for their expansion. The link between these groups and the illicit production of drugs was used by the United States authorities as the logical link for the expression “narcoguerrilla”, used as basis for the fusion between American antidrug and counterinsurgent policies in Colombia. Resulting from this, the United States advanced a process of specialization and increasing coordination among its agencies in order to address the conflict in Colombia.

Having these objectives in mind, this work is divided in two parts. The first one is dedicated to the conceptual approaches articulated by United States governments that reflect the claim of a direct link between war and crime in Colombia – namely, narcoguerrilla and narcoterrorist. To be more precise, the

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\(^1\) By Colombian conflict, this work understands the violent confrontations which resulted from the emergence of the guerrillas, in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is worth mentioning that one can pertinently argue that the XIX century sociopolitical scenario has nurtured the political claims embedded in the guerrillas (Pécaut, 1987).

\(^2\) The two main guerrillas were formed in the context of the Cold War: the FARC claim to be inspired by Marxist-Leninist principles and projects; while the ELN declares itself a Castrist-oriented political groups.
first section aims at identifying which are the main players in the process of defining these concepts, as well as what they identify as a threat in the Colombian conflict. Once these elements are outlined, efforts will focus in understanding the idea these players have of the appropriate means in order to combat the threats they've identified in the Andean country. The second section examines how these formulations triggered the development of mechanisms that have crystallized a particular form of cooperation between the United States police and Armed Forces towards the situation in Colombia. Here, special attention is given to the channels built in order to improve coordination with other institutions; and the normative and legislative updating aimed at addressing the identified threat.

The underlying logic of this work is that the so-called security policies that have been implemented by the United States towards the Colombian armed conflict constitute a long term process, which does not work within the logics of the exception declared through a speech-act\(^3\). These policies have been gradually designed, broadened and deepened and reflect a routine work of the United States agencies whose functions have been connected to the violence scenario observed in the Andean country.

This work aims at contributing to an enhanced understanding of how the professionals within these agencies have informed the debates in United States’ Congress, as well as the speeches proclaimed by the authorities in the higher political ranks. Ultimately, the challenge here is to offer some elements that allow for moving “from a threat-focused analysis to the interpretation of insecurity as a domain of practice that is produced and reproduced through socially and politically investing security rationality in policy areas” (Huysmans, 2006, p. 6).

II. Expanding the indefinite enemy

The involvement of the United States in the Colombian conflict presents two distinct features, both emerging from the same logic. In general terms, from

\(^3\) This approach has been defended by the Copenhagen School, in International Relations Theory. To assess some critiques that have been developed against this approach, see Hansen (2006) and Bigo (2002).
the 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s, United States’ initiatives towards the crisis in Colombia were mainly directed to narcotraffic – what is known in the literature as “a narcoticized foreign policy” (Crandall, 2001; 2002). The events of 2001 September 11 have changed the approach adopted by United States agencies towards the Colombian conflict, mainly through the argument of the presence of terrorist threats in the Andean country\(^4\) (Tickner, 2007; Youngers, 2006; Rojas, 2006; Villa, 2011). Both approaches were grounded in a broader narrative: that of the existence of new threats, such as transnational crime (more specifically, narcotraffic) and terrorism.

These narratives are claimed to be based in facts – nevertheless, the latter were selected by the United States agencies involved in this process in order to ground the conceptual articulations that were claimed to have inspired certain policies and practices. In this sense, it is here defended that the analysis of the processes through which these narratives have been built tells more about those who speak than about the historical events which constitute the background of these narratives (Bonditti, 2010).

Having this in mind, the first conceptual articulation that contributes to this analysis is that of the narcoguerrillas, precisely because it clearly fuses notions of crime and war into the same formulation. The general lines of this idea can be traced back to the 1981 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the 1986 National Security Decision Directive 221 (NSDD 221), both issued during Ronald Reagan administrations. These legal mechanisms were released in the context of the discourse of new threats – which implied a decreasing relevance of the “old threat” of communism. The previous administration had already associated the drug problem to the idea of a threat, when Richard Nixon (1969-1974) defended that the consumption of illicit substances constituted a “national emergency”, a “plague” that had to be fully combated.

Notwithstanding, this claim only found a legal resonance in Reagan’s mandate. In this period, the combat against drugs was raised to the extranational level, under the argument that this problem could only be definitively

\(^4\) The next section argues that this shift has not, however, implied a substantial change in the content of United States policies.
addressed if combated in its source, that is, in the states where drugs were produced. The NSDD 221 makes it explicit:

While the domestic effects of drugs are a serious societal problem for the United States [...] the national security threat posed by the drug trade is particularly serious outside US borders. Of primary concern are those nations with a flourishing narcotics industry, where a combination of international criminal trafficking organizations, rural insurgents, and urban terrorists can undermine the stability of the local government.

Of “primary concern” to the United States were the countries which hosted narcotraffic industries; the threat of drugs was found outside United States, which kept the idea of order within American borders. When not addressed within the boundaries of the host country, the drug problem could spread to other countries. Thus, the threat was not precisely the host country itself, but criminal organizations found in its territory: in the rural areas, the insurgents; in the urban ones, terrorists.

Although the idea of a “combination” between (transnational) criminals, (domestic) insurgents and (domestic) terrorists suggests the articulation underlying the notion of “narcoguerrillas”, the expression is not mentioned in the NSDD 221 or any other legal instrument issued in that period. Contrastingly, the term “narcoguerrilla” was repeatedly evoked by the United States ambassador in Bogota, Lewis Tambs – considered to be the first who used the expression, in 1983 –, as well as in congressional debates. For instance, in a 1984 session in the Senate, the representatives alerted that the guerrillas were connecting their activities with narcotraffic in order to fund their operations.

At that time, however, this claim had not resulted in strategies focused in the guerrillas’ involvement in the production of drugs: by then, the predominant position among United States’ agencies was that the guerrillas had an indirect participation in narcotraffic, mainly through the tax called gramaje, to the surveillance of crops and laboratories and to the tax charged over the use of clandestine airplane tracks in regions controlled by these armed groups (Rojas, 2006, p. 40). On these grounds, the efforts against illicit drugs were considered as a different realm from that of counterinsurgency.

The gap between the recurrent mention to the term and its omission in legal instruments can be interpreted as a certain resistance – which did not last though – in bringing back the repertoire of United States agencies in counterinsurgency that had characterized the fight against the communist threat in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the congressional debates about counterinsurgency in Latin America in the 1980s were more attentive to the United States’ intervention in Central America (Ramírez, 2004). At the same time, it can be read as an effort to justify the claim of a “new threat”, which required new tools and agencies in order to be fought.

In order to illustrate this move, both the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) were created as key agencies in the fight against drugs. In 1973, Richard Nixon’s administration has created the DEA as a single unified command to combat “an all-out global war on the drug menace”. The ONDCP was created in 1988, through the AntiDrug Abuse Act⁶, with the objective of setting priorities, implementing the national strategy against drugs and certifying drug-control budgets. Most importantly, these agencies produced reports on drugs which informed the Congressional debates on antidrug policies since then. It is remarkable that, during the discussions on the AntiDrug Abuse Act, an amendment was introduced to the bill project in order to balance its emphasis in the domestic realm: the reformed version called for the cooperation between the ONDCP and United States intelligence agencies in order to actively combat the international drug trafficking.

Although the concept of “narcoguerrillas” was recurrent in the discourse of United States agencies and lawmakers, it was not before the 1990s that the term was used in a more systematic way. Indeed, the 1990s are considered to be a period of an increasing presence of armed groups in almost all strategic regions for the production of cocaine in the country (International Crisis Group, 2005; Echandía, 2006). It is relevant to consider that the paramilitaries also had control over coca leaf crops and clandestine laboratories⁷ and, nevertheless,

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⁷ A strong evidence for that is that the conflicts involving FARC and paramilitary forces increased considerably during this period (Echandía, 2006)
the expression coined by the United States government makes only reference to the guerrillas. This asymmetry in concept is also verified in practice.

In 1993, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) published a report entitled *The drug war: Colombia is undertaking antidrug programs, but impact is uncertain*\(^8\), which aimed at informing the debates in the House of Representatives on counternarcotics policies implemented in Colombia. The document underlined United States Embassy’s and DEA’s reports on the close links between insurgency and narcotraffic (1993, p. 26) – what, according to the United States ambassador, required that the military conducted “both counterinsurgency and counternarcotics missions” (Idem, p. 27).

The identification of a link between insurgents and narcotraffickers operated in order to attribute a new meaning to the antidrug policies. Considering that the narcotraffic was the main funding source for the guerrillas, to fight illicit crops meant also to weaken these armed groups and to contribute to peace in Colombia. The content of the strategy, however, had not been changed: it was still focused on combating illicit crops through, as we will see more attentively in the following section, war and law enforcement policies – but now with an identified positive side-effect. Thus, rather than the reformulation of the United States strategy towards Colombia, the concept of “narcoguerrilla” allowed for the antidrug policies to be associated to the Colombian armed conflict.

In general, the argument of the “narcotization” of the guerrillas is associated with the loss of their political project. According to this perspective, whatever the political project these guerrillas claimed to represent or defend when they were founded, their political goals are lost and substituted by a rent-seeking logics (Kaldor, 2007; Collier, 2000). Although this is a contested claim\(^9\), it has permeated the debates in the United States Congress and resulted in an even deeper disqualification of these armed groups, once linking them with

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\(^9\) Chernick (2005) and Pécaut (2006; 2010), for instance, argue that the mobilization of narcotraffic resources by the guerrillas is not a sufficient condition for privileging “greed” (as Collier puts) instead of political claims. According to these authors, the resources pursued by the FARC in narcotraffic are in service of a political project. For Chernick (2005, p. 205), “[t]he Colombian experience suggests that resource mobilization (greed) alone does not explain the origins or the duration of the war. Other factors – such as grievances, ideology, leadership, military strategy, and international factors – are also key”.
nothing but transnational crime. Put differently, when merging narcotraffic and guerrilla in the same formulation, the concept of “narcoguerrilla” stands out the rent-seeking aspect of these armed groups and silences the political claims underlying their activities. In terms of policies, this move implied the implementation of a set of crime tools to address a criminal phenomenon.

The disqualification of Colombian guerrillas was radicalized after September 11, when the term “narcoguerrilla” was inflated to “narcoterrorist”. This move was coordinated by both Bush’s and Uribe’s administrations under an alleged anachronism of the former expression in the context of the terrorist threat – as exemplified by Lieutenant General Bantz Craddock, former Assistant Deputy Director for Strategy to the Secretary of the State, in his address to the Senate in July 2004:

> the terms “insurgents” or “guerrillas” are less applicable today than in the past. I believe the term “narcoterrorists” is more appropriate, given the fact that the center of gravity for these groups is the incredible financial support they get from illicit drug trafficking, which motivates them to protect and manage the entire process of growing, processing, and trafficking illicit drugs.

Despite the claim of anachronism, it is worth underlining that the “terrorism” itself has not emerged in the context of the global war on terror; it is a term evoked since the 1960s by the United States’ agencies to refer to a tactic/strategy (for instance, bombings, hijackings and kidnappings) used by insurgents and/or guerrillas in order to maintain local populations in an atmosphere of fear (Bonditti, 2010). Even in the particular case of Colombia, the term “terrorism” had already been used in past occasions – such as the NSDD 221 –, mainly to characterize the tactics/strategy used by the narcotraffickers. This is somehow maintained with the concepts of “narcoguerrilla” and “narcoterrorist”. The declaration made by the Secretary of State at that time, Colin Powell, is illustrative of this perspective:

> For a number of years, our efforts were strictly directed at narcotrafficking. Congress wanted to make sure that we didn’t get involved in the other aspects of the terrorism situation in Colombia. But after 9/11, as we looked at terrorist activities around the world,

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and maybe the FARC and the AUC and the ELN do not have global reach in the sense that al-Qaida has global reach, but when you start to see members of the IRA in Colombia. [...] the President, since 9/11, has increased the attention we have given to terrorism of all forms, even if they may not all be of the form of al-Qaida. [...] we really should remove this barrier between narcotrafficking activities and narcoterrorist activities. [...] It all essentially leads to the same end, and that is the destruction of the Colombian democracy. 

From this moment on, the Colombian armed conflict was increasingly interpreted as the main terrorist threat in the Americas. In this context, Colombian armed groups were recurrently evoked as an example when trying to show that the anti-terrorist crusade led by the United States was not restricted to Islamic organizations (Rojas, 2006, p. 54).

When brought into the context of the global war on terror, the radical otherness that characterizes the framing of the enemy as a terrorist is taken to a broader scale and meaning. The United States’ global war on terror involves a fight between those who threaten the achievements of humanity and those who protect it, that is, a binary choice between enemy and friend. Once extended to the global scale, this discourse implies that the enemy is actually found outside humanity. The problem is that to claim a war waged against the enemy of humanity implies triggering not only violent discourses, but also violent actions through which inclusion/exclusion is made on the basis of allowing existence for those considered to be friends and denying existence to those considered to be enemies.

Moreover, the word “terrorism” is a contested one. There is a wide range of actors, meanings and actions associated to the word “terrorism”, constituting an overarching term applicable from the taking of hostages and hijackings to bomb-attacks. In any case, however, the ultimate effect of the word “terrorism” is the disqualification of those considered to fit in this category and the de-legitimization of their actions. Beyond that, it establishes two different sets of violence: a “tolerated violence” and a terrorist one. The first one is circumscribed into the lines upon which the sovereign state is structured (Bonditti, 2010) – to the concern of this work, the functional and geographical boundaries which differentiate military from police. Put differently, the “tolerated

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violence” is predicted and codified by the laws and principles operating in the national/international. Contrastingly, the “terrorist violence, neither really criminal, nor really military, is thus differentiated from the two main orders of violence that the Western world had known until then” (Bonditti, 2010, n.p.) – namely, military and police.

In the light of the concepts debated above, the next section turns to the policies designed by the United States in order to identify if they somehow reflect the conceptual transitions here analyzed, as well as how this has occurred.

III. Merging crime and war fighting

The United States’ initiatives designed in order to address the Colombian armed conflict invariably presented an antidrug approach. However, as we have seen, these moves were not made simultaneously, but through a long process of articulation which involved multiple actors within the United States. In this trajectory, it is possible to identify the emergence and re-emergence of claims, as well as the downplaying of others. This section aims at analyzing how this articulation process has been translated into institutions, policies, and tools. Read together, both sections expect to provide an outline of the conditions of possibility for the superposition of war and crime fighting tools in Colombia.

To begin with, it is noteworthy that the approximation between police and military functions was not a move restricted to Colombia, neither to the drugs issue. By the late 1980s and 1990s, the claim of the existence of “new threats” was followed by a demand for a redefinition of the role of police and military forces – which was broadly defined as “Military Operations Other Than War” (MOOTW). However, as regards the Colombian case, many of these alleged “new threats” have been placed under the broad label of global organized crime – hence the central importance of the “war on drugs”.

It is not by chance that the United States agencies refer to their policies towards Colombia as part of a “war on drugs”. Once narcotics were repeatedly claimed to represent a threat to the United States national security, the deployment of military resources in the strategy of combating drugs was seen as a natural course of action. As senator Joseph Biden has put in 1990, “[m]any
of the most promising technologies [for drug control] have already been developed by the Defense Department over the last 10 years for military purposes“ (Apud Andreas; Price, 2001, p. 38) and then made available to law enforcement.

In 1981, the NDAA formalized the terms through which narcotraffic had to be fought, attributing to the United States Department of Defense the authority and the resources for the coordination of antidrug initiatives, implemented domestically and abroad. As regards the latter, the NDAA operated according to three criteria: i) the country receiving the aid should officially invite United States Armed Forces to act in its territory; ii) the operations should be coordinated by American forces; and iii) the activities conducted by American militaries should only provide support to local militaries. Having already the competence to coordinate antidrug operations in other countries, the Department of Defense had its role reaffirmed and expanded by the Directive 221 (1986) towards intelligence functions, in coordination with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The NDAA and the Directive 221 constituted the general legal framework to which a set of military and law enforcement measures was incorporated, allowing for the “war on drugs” to be broadened and deepened. All of these political guidelines were built upon the logic of the “supply-side approach”, according to which the most efficient way to combat the threat of narcotraffic was to attack the problem in its source, that is, the countries considered to be the main producers of the drug directed to the United States\textsuperscript{12}.

The supply-side approach has also characterized the following administrations. In the first year of George Bush’s government (1989-1993), the Congress approved the National Security Directive 18 (NSD 18), which created the International Counternarcotics Strategy – also known as Andean Initiative. Despite its regional name, Colombia was the focus of the initiative, since the country was claimed to be “the home of the major trafficking organizations and the principal production facilities for US destined cocaine”\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{12} Once Colombia was identified as the main cocaine producer at that time, 70% of the resources involved in antidrug programs of Reagan’s administration were directed to Colombia (National Drug Control Strategy, 1998).

This program reinforced the externalization and militarization of United States antidrug policies but, most notably, it triggered the approximation between war fighting and crime fighting. Indeed, the Initiative aimed primarily at strengthening military and police operations in the war on drugs and advising local military and police forces as regards the dismantling of drug cartels. These goals were to be met through the provision of military and technological equipments, as well as of training and intelligence services\textsuperscript{14}. The approach of the “war on drugs” and the predominant role played by the Ministry of Defense and Department of the State in the designing of the political guidelines of United States initiative towards the Andean countries required the expansion of Southern Command, Ministry of Defense’s regional division for Latin America.

By 1992, the position that the Andean Initiative had failed in its efforts of reducing the destination of cocaine and heroin to the United States was wielding influence within the Congress. The same line of argument was presented by Bill Clinton, when running for the 1993 presidential elections: he proposed rearranging the resources distribution of antidrug policies with a focus on the domestic level, mainly through law enforcement and health policies. However, what seemed to be a move in a different direction from that of the supply-side approach was, however, reversed after the victory of the Republican Party in 1994 legislative elections. The strengthening of critical positions against the “soft line” of Clinton’s administration towards the drug problem led to the reaffirmation of goals defined in previous antidrug strategies. Operating within continuity in terms of content, the Congress approved a series of increases in financial resources towards antidrug initiatives from 1997 onwards – process consolidated with the approval, in 1998, of the Western Hemisphere Drug Elimination Act, which established a significant increase in interdiction and eradication policies.

In 1996 and 1997, Colombia was de-certified and, in the following year, the country was certified on the grounds of national interest – which means that all of the negative assessments of Colombian cooperation on antidrug programs were made during Ernesto Samper’s administration (1994-1998).

\textsuperscript{14} Here, it is important to mention that the CIA, by that time, had created a Crime and Counternarcotics Center, which received collaborators from the DEA and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (Andreas; Price, 2001, p. 41).
Samper was accused and charged for having his electoral campaign financed by the Cali cartel. In reaction to the scandal, the United States have isolated the Colombian president through de-certifications and the refuse to give him a visa to enter the United States. Nevertheless, the predominant position in the United States Congress defended the continuity of the war on drugs despite the scandal. Extending the accusations of corruption to the Armed Forces, Clinton’s administration chose to maintain the flow of resources to Colombia, but focused its cooperation with the Colombian National Police\textsuperscript{15}, which became the main beneficiary of the modernization, training and financial resources provided by the United States at that time. To the Armed Forces, it was only left the support to the tasks undertaken by the Police.

This conduct of setting aside both the Colombian Presidency and Armed Forces continued until the government was changed in the Andean country and Samper was substituted by Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). In his administration, the bilateral cooperation in terms of advising, training, equipments and intelligence reincorporated the Armed Forces and the central government as interlocutors and beneficiaries – in addition to the Colombian National Police. In this context, the United States supported the creation of the first antinarcotics battalion, in 1999, and trained 931 of its soldiers through the SouthCom (Rojas, 2006, p. 50). In the same year, Clinton certified Colombia’s efforts in combating drugs.

Most importantly, the support manifested by the United States towards Andrés Pastrana required the acceptance of certain elements of his peace strategy. Ultimately, this meant putting together the drug and the armed conflict problems into one strategy. This equation was solved by the United States through the concept of “narcoguerrilla”, which was incorporated to the counternarcotics legal framework and stimulated the merging between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics missions led by militaries in foreign territories.

As mentioned in the past section, the concept of narcoguerrillas was based upon the idea that these armed groups found in narcotraffic the

\textsuperscript{15} It is noteworthy that, in Colombia, both military forces and the National Police constitute the Armed Forces, whose commander is the Minister of Defense. However, through time, the significant destination of resources and the confidence laid by the United States have made of the National Police an almost autonomous institution.
resources they needed in order to expand their strategic position in the Colombian conflict. This formulation allowed for a re-reading of United States' war on drugs, according to which the fight against illicit drugs would weaken the armed groups, once the latter would be left with no resources in order to arm themselves. Thus, this line of argument happened to provide another meaning to the war on drugs: antidrug policies would yield not only the reduction of a threat to the United States' national security, but also peace in Colombia. This re-interpretation of United States' initiatives towards Colombia did not demand, however, a re-elaboration in terms of content of the policies that had been implemented in Colombia until then: its priorities and guidelines remained the same, that is, emphatic to the drug problem, and not the armed conflict.

When demanded for a greater involvement in the dialogues undertaken with the guerrillas, some members of the United States Department of the State believed that it could be possible to implement in Colombia the same strategy they had used in El Salvador at the end of the 1980s. In fact, the proponents of this idea – namely, the United States ambassador in Colombia, Anne Patterson, and a group of the Department of the State members – had experience in the negotiation process with the guerrillas of that Centro-American country (Rojas, 2006, p. 49). Their idea was to avoid the direct military involvement of the United States in the armed conflict, while providing assistance in terms of equipments, training and intelligence with the objective of weakening the armed groups and creating the conditions for a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

This position has faced considerable resistance from several sectors, including a group within the Department of the State and the Congress. The idea was marginalized in the congressional debates and only resumed after three American citizens were killed, in March 1999. Considering a “barbarous act of terrorism”, the Department of the State demanded that the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC, in Spanish) took the responsibility for the assassination (El Tiempo, 1999). Those who criticized a direct involvement of the United States in the Colombian armed conflict found another reason to resist to this proposal when, in July 1999, an United States intelligence airplane (RC-7B) was knocked down in Southern Colombia. All of these events were added to the great dissatisfaction as regards El Caguán, the demilitarized zone that Pastrana had conceded to the FARC and translated into the version of the
Plan Colombia finally approved, in July 2000, in both houses of the United States Congress. This process was marked by many disputes among the governmental agencies: the final version reflected more closely the interests of the ONDCP, the Department of Defense and the Department of State (Ramírez, 2004, p. 252), and differed significantly from the proposals defended by a small group inside the Department of State and by the USAID (Chernick, 2008, p. 132), who were more keen to a direct involvement in the negotiation process.

The Plan combined old and new counternarcotics measures. In the first group, there was the fumigation of illicit crops – backed by the antinarcotics battalions –, the control of chemical elements trade and the destruction of clandestine laboratories. As for the new measures, it is possible to underline the military operations with the objective to control the regions where a significant production of cocaine was identified.

Given its emphasis on the military approach, the Plan Colombia aimed at strengthening and modernizing the Colombian Armed Forces, in order to transform its numeric advantage in tactical and operational ones. As signaled by a report developed by the RAND Corporation, this would only be possible by adding speed to the military operations (Rabasa; Chalk, 2002, p. 65). With this goal, the cooperation led by the United States triggered policies aimed at developing an integrated system of communication; ameliorating techniques of data collection and processing; integrating terrestrial and aerial forces; and creating a control mechanism for rivers. In this same direction, between 2000 and 2001, there were created fast operation brigades, navigation and communication teams and five battalions – in addition to other two counternarcotics battalions. The latter are the emblematic example of the militarization characteristic to the war on drugs, once they are military units specialized in guaranteeing that the eradication of illicit crops is efficiently undertaken. Their function was specifically to assure the success of the fumigation operations.

If, at first sight, the Plan Colombia remained predominantly an antidrug initiative, the logics underlying the program had been transformed: through the fight against illicit coca leaf crops, the goal was to weaken the guerrillas. However, the intensity of this transformation should not be overvalued, once the
means remained essentially the same – that is, antidrug policies which articulated military and police tools.

The connection between the armed conflict and the war on terror had as one of its main consequences the expansion and consolidation of the military strategy as the path towards the conflict resolution. In this direction, George W. Bush’s administration (2001-2008) rejected any approximation towards peace initiatives based on the dialogue with guerrilla groups. The political profile of the staff of his administration reflect the military approach the United States projected on Colombia: for instance, Otto J. Reich, known for his fierce criticism against Cuba and his support to the Nicaraguan contras during the 1980s, was named subsecretary of State for Hemispheric Affairs; and John P. Walters, who criticized Clinton’s “soft line” on the drug problem, was named director of the ONDCP (also known as drug czar), in the ONDCP. Besides, Bush declined Pastrana’s invitation for the United States to join the group of countries who were following up the peace process, as well another invitation for him to participate in an international conference on illicit crops, which would be held in El Caguán, the demilitarized zone.

The hijacking by FARC of an Avianca airplane, in February 2002, has determined the suspension of the peace process led by Pastrana. The event was used by the United States administration as grounds for the claim of the need for a military approach against the guerrillas. Fueled by this scenario as well as by the war on terror context, the president Álvaro Uribe aligned his speech with that of Washington and bracketed the guerrillas as terrorist groups, denying any reading of the conflict associated to socioeconomic and sociopolitical causes.

The link between guerrillas and terrorism was recurrently evoked after the guerrillas (notably, the National Liberation Army – ELN, in Spanish) started to intensify bombings against the Colombian oil infrastructure. The pipeline Caño Limón-Coveñas was the main target of the ELN bombings, given its importance in the transportation of oil in the Northern part of the country. The bombings have caused financial losses to oil companies operating in Colombia,

16 These were undertaken mainly by the ELN. In 1980, this guerrilla re-structured its military and political strategies and focused its actions against the foreign oil companies operating in Colombia (Rochlin, 2002; 2003).
including the Occidental Petroleum, American multinational which controlled approximately 43% of the oil circulating in Caño Limón-Coveñas (Isacson, 2005, p. 141). According to the 2002 annual report of the United States’ Department of State *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, the attacks against this pipeline represented 51% of the attacks registered in Colombia in 2001 (United States Department, 2003).

In 2003, Bush presented to the Congress the Andean Counterdrug Initiative (ACI), aiming at deepening the fight against drugs in the Andean region. The debates surrounding Bush’s proposal were mainly focused in: i) the incorporation of human rights conditions for the resources to be transferred; ii) the blockage of the financial resources to aerial fumigation until the secretaries of the State and of Health determined that these practices were not causing health damages to Colombian citizens, and that the chemical products applied were in conformity with environmental requirements; iii) the reduction of the amount of resources directed to antidrug policies; and iv) the establishment of limits to the number of military and private personnel (Ramírez, 2004, p. 254).

The version finally approved in 2003 by the Congress defined a budget of US$ 882 million, of which 46,2% were directed to eradication and fumigation policies, as well as to military and police training and equipping in Colombia.

These efforts were justified on the grounds of the National Security Strategy issued in 2002, according to which: “[i]n Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups”\(^{17}\). The ACI is the policy adopted after September 11 which most neatly removes the ambiguities presented in Plan Colombia between antidrug and counterinsurgent goals. To be more precise, the ACI is the first United States’ initiative to Colombia which is not exclusively related to drugs, and, in this sense, signals the expansion of United States agenda towards Colombia.

As we have seen, the trajectory of United States policies towards Colombia reveals a transition from counternarcotics to counterterrorism. However, both stages share the predominance of military and police tools and the emphasis on the drug problem. Indeed, Uribe’s and Bush’s administrations

agreed that, in order to fight Colombian guerrillas, it is necessary to eradicate illicit crops, once narcotraffic constitutes the main funding source for the guerrillas. In this sense, the transition observed in United States policies towards Colombia has occurred through a transposition of the counterdrug and counterinsurgent strategies, rather than through a whole new formulation. Put differently, these policies changed from the securitization of the drug problem to the narcotization of the armed conflict.

IV. Final remarks

The policies through which the United States addressed the Colombian armed conflict went through a gradually broadening and deepening process, which was rooted in the “war on drugs”. As Bigo puts it: “[s]ecuritization works through everyday technologies, through the effects of power that are continuous rather than exceptional, through political struggles, and especially through institutional competition within the professional security field in which the most trivial interests are at stake” (2002, p.73).

The expansion of this strategy led to the numeric growth of agencies – as exemplified by the creation of the DEA and the ONDCP in late 1970s and 1980s – and of the contractors and budget of these agencies. As an example of the latter, the DEA had, at its outset, 1,470 special agents and a budget of less than US$ 75 million; today, it has nearly 5,000 special agents and a budget of US$ 2,02 billion (DEA, 2011).

At the same time the antidrug policies have modified the institutional structure through the addition of more agencies, the disputes among these actors have also conditioned the following policies. However, as we have seen, among the players underlined in this analysis, the Department of the State, the Defense Department (mainly through SouthCom), the DEA and the ONDCP have played a more consistent role in shaping and defining the terms of the strategy towards Colombia.

18 Although not in the scope of this analysis, it is important to mention the companies related to the production of warfare, private security companies and banks, whose interests were somehow reflected in the positions voiced in the United States’ Congress.
The lines defended by these players are evidenced in the policies analyzed in this work. And these lines have been massively applied and reproduced in Colombia through the years: between 2000 and 2006, the United States directed to Colombia US$ 4.7 billion, of which 80% (US$ 3.8 billion) corresponded to resources aimed at arms, helicopters, airplanes, boats, combat equipments, training, consulting, intelligence and fumigation (Isacson, 2006).

The predominant feature of the United States’ antidrug policies was the approximation between police and military functions. The antinarcotics battalions constitute an emblematic example of this aspect, once they circumscribe the ultimate goal in law enforcement in the war on drugs – the eradication and fumigation of illicit crops – within a military unit. Another example is the close cooperation between police and intelligence in crime fighting.

As we have seen, the blurring of the boundaries separating crime and war fighting tools has been permeated by debates among a group of agencies as regards the enemy facing the United States. In this context, it is interesting to note that the delineation of the concepts which were claimed to justify antidrug policies occurred simultaneously to the implementation of these policies. In other words, even before a full understanding of what the strategy was fighting against, technologies were being developed, people were being contracted and laws were being enacted against it. In this sense, the concept of “narcoterrorist” allowed for the radicalization of a set of continuous and consistent antidrug policies that were already at play. This radicalization, however, must not be neglected, once it constituted the extreme disqualification and de-legitimization of Colombian guerrillas.

Once the approximation between war fighting and crime fighting, and the radicalization of otherness are formalized, the expanded narratives through which this functional blurring is based on are crystallized and leave a reduced – if any – space for contestation or reversion. This takes particularly troublesome proportions in the case of the radical otherness, implied in the terrorism vocabulary (Bonditti, 2010).
References


