

The Failure of ‘Plan Colombia’ and of US-Colombian Counterinsurgency under President Álvaro Uribe

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Abstract

This article shows that the counterinsurgency campaign waged by Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and the USA against FARC regarded the Colombian Civil War not as a war, but as a problem of crime and narco-trafficking. As a result, the counterinsurgency campaign suffered greatly from this misperception to the point that it misidentified the political nature of the war and its centres of gravity, namely FARC’s impoverished rural support base and Colombia’s historical agrarian conflict. While important operational victories were achieved, the consequence of the military campaigns was a deepening of the historical political and economic dynamics that motivated the FARC insurgency.

Keywords: COIN, strategy, Uribe, FARC, Colombia.

Introduction

This article analyses the counterinsurgency campaign waged by the Colombian government of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and the United States against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which waged war against the Colombian Republic from 1964 to 2016. The scope chosen corresponds to Uribe’s two terms, the peace deal that resulted from Juan Manuel Santos’ Presidency (2010-2018), and the duration of ‘Plan Colombia’. The counterinsurgency campaign was a response to the threat posed by FARC during its peak military power in the early 2000s, and was conducted under the framework of the 2000-2015 US-Colombian assistance package called ‘Plan Colombia’.¹ ‘Plan Colombia’ underpinned Uribe’s notion of ‘democratic security’ and the resulting counterinsurgency; it effectively turned Colombia into “America’s number three war.”²

The research question guiding this study is: what are the problems of approaching insurgency as organised crime? This question is especially pertinent in light of the identified problems arising from Uribe’s perception of the Colombian Civil War (CCW) as a problem of crime and narco-trafficking, rather than as a war, affecting the consequent counterinsurgency campaign. This article will argue that the conflation of organised crime and insurgency seen in ‘Plan Colombia’ and the Uribe government’s response to FARC is best understood as a continuation of the ‘New Wars’ narrative, which fails to properly conceptualise insurgent and criminal violence due to its ahistorical approach and creation of a false dichotomy between politics and economics. In applying J.C. Wylie’s strategic theory of power control to the study of the CCW, this article showcases the importance of the political and economic dynamics

¹ Jonathan Rosen, *The Losing War: Plan Colombia and Beyond* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 1.

² Thomas Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency” in *Stability Ops in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Jenny Solon (Fort Leavenworth: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011), 43.

underlying the conflict and use of violence, whilst simultaneously highlighting the strategic failures of the US and Colombian counterinsurgency efforts.

This article will first critically discuss the relationship between insurgency and organised crime as conceived in the ‘New Wars’ thesis, arguing that the myriad of issues within the thesis result in a mistaken approach to counterinsurgency. The second part explicates the case study of ‘Plan Colombia’, using the previous theoretical discussion to analyse the strategic failure at the core of US-Colombian counterinsurgency and show its link to the current situation of Colombia and the problems it faces in implementing the 2016 peace deal. The importance of this research question, and this paper’s response to it, is that it empowers a better understanding of ‘Plan Colombia’ and Uribe’s ‘democratic security’ as part of a wider academic and political context. Showing the strategic failure at the heart of ‘Plan Colombia’ is of particular policy importance, since ‘Plan Colombia’ is considered a successful “small footprint, indigenously-conducted COIN”³ model to be replicated elsewhere (for example in Mexico) among US policymakers.⁴

Insurgency and Organised Crime

The generally agreed-upon distinction between organised crime and insurgency is that criminals seek profit, whereas insurgents employ the revenues from criminal activities as means to achieve their political goals.⁵ This insight is axiomatic to the theoretical analyses addressed in this article, although these theories develop in very different ways (and draw antagonistic conclusions). Kaldor makes this exact same distinction between crime and war but argues that in contrast to the political nature of old pre-globalisation wars, contemporary ‘New Wars’ are characterised by the blurring of the boundaries between criminality and warfare as a consequence of globalisation, meaning that contemporary wars are conceived as criminal instead of political phenomena.⁶

In Colombia, this popular line of thought leads to the perception of the FARC insurgency as a problem of organised crime rather than a war driven by politics. This is the ‘narcoguerrilla’ theory of the CCW, a term popularised in 1984 by US Ambassador to Colombia, Lewis Tambs⁷, and maintained by key Colombian actors like Uribe and among US policymakers.⁸ This view regards the FARC as the key actor in the drug trade after the demise of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1990s⁹, and the FARC leadership as having lost their ideological *raison d’être* and political objectives because of their participation in narco-trafficking.¹⁰

The overarching problem of the ‘New Wars’ thesis (and of its application to the CCW) is that it reduces conflicts to a set of characteristics that supposedly are more prevalent in

³ Jorge Delgado, “Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 3 (2015): 408.

⁴ Blanca Paniago, *Lucha contra el narcotráfico: un análisis comparativo del Plan Colombia y la Iniciativa Mérida* (Madrid: CEU Ediciones, 2019), 43.

⁵ Bilal Saab and Alexandra Taylor, “Criminality and Armed Groups,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32, no. 6 (2009): 457.

⁶ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 2-4; Stathis Kalyvas, ““New” and “Old” Wars. A valid Distinction?” *World Politics* 54, no. 1 (2001): 99.

⁷ Renán Vega, *La Dimensión Internacional del Conflicto Social y Armado en Colombia: Injerencia de los Estados Unidos, Contrainsurgencia y Terrorismo de Estado* (Bogotá: Espacio Crítico, 2015), 38.

⁸ Rosen, *The Losing War*, 43, 50.

⁹ Arlene Tickner, “Colombia and the United States: from Counternarcotics to Counterterrorism,” *Current History* 102, no. 661 (2003): 80.

¹⁰ Phillip Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime: Explaining the So-Called “Political Involution” of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia,” *Politics & Society* 39, no. 3 (2011): 381-382.

contemporary times, as well as abstracting wars from its specific context and historical background.¹¹ At its core, it imposes a false dichotomy between politics and economics, by which actors must be either motivated by greed-profit—in which case they are criminals—or by ideology-grievance—in which case they are political actors.¹² Such a view fails to recognise that politics is largely about the aggregation of economic interests, as Charles Tilly's 1992 analysis of capital and coercion indicates.¹³ The 'New Wars' thesis's emphasis on the apolitical nature of contemporary violence thus results in a failure to recognise the way that political discourse works in each context- in which the interaction of economic and political agendas cannot be separated into distinct analytical categories.¹⁴ In sum, a higher incidence of criminality in contemporary wars does not necessarily correspond with a depoliticisation of the combatants, as the 'New Wars' thesis posits.

This is not to say that 'New Wars' is an inherently poor theory. It correctly identifies the impact of globalisation on the character of war.¹⁵ Increased interconnectivity, mobility and access to capital have brought about new opportunities for combatants in terms of financing and access to arms, as well as linked local political-economic dynamics to global trends.¹⁶ But this does not necessarily mean that violence is no longer political. Instead, this changed character of war corresponds to changes in global politics and is best seen as a manifestation of the chameleonic nature of war. This is exemplified by the FARC insurgency in Colombia. Contrary to Luis Alberto Moreno's (former Colombian Ambassador to the US) claim that FARC involvement in narco-trafficking since the 1970s led to a involution after which it ceased to be a political insurgency, FARC never lost its political nature as a Marxist-Leninist peasant organisation.¹⁷ Indeed, despite acquiring between 50% and 90% of its income from narco-trafficking¹⁸, FARC's historical demand for land reform continued to be the first agenda point in its negotiations with the Santos government.¹⁹ Moreover, the FARC notably reinvested all goods and revenues into the organisation itself, which led to a considerable increase in military capabilities.²⁰ This denotes the strategic logic behind FARC's criminal involvement and criminal violence.

Analysis of the FARC involvement in narco-trafficking highlights how involvement in crime does not diminish the political reasons for conflict. Rather, the FARC involvement was primarily for highly political reasons which fit into their larger objectives and strategy. In a country like Colombia, where the coca economy is the only means of subsistence for hundreds of thousands of peasant families²¹, the FARC was able to present itself as the protector of marginalised communities like the *cocaleros*.²² Regulating the coca economy, resolving

¹¹ Mats Berdal, "The 'New Wars' Thesis Revisited," in *The Changing Character of War*, eds. Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 116, 111-112.

¹² Kalyvas, "'New' and 'Old' Wars," 102.

¹³ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), 4.

¹⁴ Mats Berdal, "Beyond Greed and Grievance: And Not Too Soon ... A Review Essay," *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 4 (2005): 691.

¹⁵ Berdal, "The 'New Wars' Thesis Revisited," 110.

¹⁶ Mats Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'?" *Global Governance* 9, no. 4 (2003): 482.

¹⁷ Hough, "Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime," 381; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 69.

¹⁸ Tobias Bruce-Jones and M.L.R. Smith, "Coca, Clausewitz, and Colombia," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 41 (2019): 6.

¹⁹ Macarena Arcos, *Colombia: Un país sumido en más de medio siglo de conflicto* (Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2015), 7-8.

²⁰ Hough, "Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime," 384; Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 70.

²¹ Delgado, "Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building," 416.

²² John de Boer, Juan Carlos Garzón-Vergara and Louise Bossetti, *Criminal Agendas and Peace Negotiations: The Case of Colombia* (New York: United Nations Centre for Policy Research, 2017), 6.

disputes, and delivering justice in the areas under its control meant that FARC established a de facto state, even developing social, economic, and public works infrastructure.²³

This example of FARC’s criminal activities clearly shows that there is political action associated to criminal economies and that criminal groups can be (intentionally or unintentionally) involved in political discourse. This last view is convincingly developed by Christine Cheng’s analysis of Liberia’s ‘extra-legal groups’, which become (unintentional) de facto statebuilders as a by-product of their commercial activities and environment.²⁴ This is because by virtue of asserting control, usually via coercion, over underworld illegal markets, organised crime undertakes governance roles by setting norms, distributing resources and solving disputes.²⁵ Depending on particular contexts, organised crime also engages with “upperworld”²⁶ politics, even if it does not seek to replace the state, as the examples of the Cali and Medellín cartels show.²⁷

This context-dependency means that a dichotomic view of criminality and insurgency-war cannot be applied to conflicts like the CCW, in which the main insurgent group responds to a very specific interplay between economic and political factors. Instead, crime and insurgency can be understood as a continuum that is contingent on the interrelation between economic and political discourse in each specific context. This makes the violence and any other means employed by both organised crime and insurgent groups inherently strategic, purposive, and political, although - as understood by M.L.R. Smith - each type of violence will be politicised to different levels.²⁸ With the notion of a continuum, the distinction between profit and political-ideological goals can be maintained, though not in a dichotomic way. This does not exclude the interconnectedness of political and economic agendas, nor does it reduce contemporary conflicts to a simplistic understanding of greed-motivated crime devoid of political and strategic connotations. In essence, increased criminality does not equate to decreased political-ideological goals.²⁹ Thus, at this point of the argument, it becomes necessary to introduce a general theory of strategy that encompasses both criminal and insurgent violence into a single strategic framework. Utilising this will allow clarification of the nature of FARC’s violence whilst also highlighting the failures of US-Colombian counterinsurgency.

Admiral Wylie’s theory of control provides such general theory of strategy, and at its core states that:

‘The primary aim of the strategist in the conduct of the war is some selected degree of control of the enemy for the strategist’s own purpose; this is achieved by control of the pattern of war; and this control of the pattern of war is had by manipulation of the centre of gravity of war to the advantage of the strategist and the disadvantage of the opponent.’³⁰

²³ *Ibid.*; Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime,” 390.

²⁴ Christine Cheng, *Extralegal Groups in Post-Conflict Liberia: How Trade Makes the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 253, 281.

²⁵ James Cockayne, “Chasing Shadows: Strategic Responses to Organised Crime in Conflict-Affected Situations,” *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013): 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ Francisco Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs, Anti-Drug Policy Failure, and the Need for Institutional Reforms in Colombia,” *Substance Use & Misuse* 47, no. 8-9 (2012): 977.

²⁸ M.L.R. Smith, “Strategy in an Age of ‘Low-Intensity’ Warfare,” in *Rethinking the Nature of War*, eds. Jan Angstrom and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 33-35.

²⁹ Francisco Gutiérrez, “Clausewitz Vindicated?” in *Order, Conflict and Violence*, eds. Stathis Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro and Tarek Masoud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 220.

³⁰ Joseph Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 77-78.

Per this framework, combined with the notion of a crime-insurgency continuum, violence is used to advance different political-economic interests. Some are aimed at controlling capital and trade flows, whilst others aimed at establishing control over the political institutions of the state. All are ingrained into the dynamics of the wider polity. This notion goes back to Tilly, who considered criminal activities like banditry, piracy and gangs as belonging to the same continuum as policing and war-making.³¹

In line with this, FARC's insurgency can be considered part of the ever-changing character of war³², with its criminal activities used to achieve its political ends and control of the pattern of the war. The 'New Wars' thesis's improper categorisation of conflicts like the CCW as crime or narcoterrorism, rather than war, leads to a "destrategisation"³³: the failure to identify the amount of time and resources necessary to achieve particular goals under conditions of political uncertainty leading to technocratic solutions that do not relate to the goals nor to the political environment in which they are applied. Counternarcotics and improving state capacity and territorial control—statebuilding—in 'Plan Colombia' and 'democratic security' are clear examples of this.

Case Study: Plan Colombia and Democratic Security

FARC peaked in military power in the early 2000s. With approximately 20,000 members, it decimated battalions of the Colombian army in open combat and controlled around 40% of Colombian territory, including the hills overlooking Bogotá.³⁴ As a consequence, Colombian and US policymakers feared that Colombia would become a failed state.³⁵ This prompted President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) to propose structural changes like land reform and seek US assistance in order to avoid the perceived impending collapse.³⁶

Resentment over the failure of Pastrana's peace programme made the public more inclined towards Uribe's hardline approach to the guerrillas.³⁷ Uribe viewed the FARC as a narcoguerrilla group solely motivated by the profits of narcotrafficking and identified Colombia's weak state capacity as the overarching problem to be fixed.³⁸ His subsequent 'democratic security' policy sought to address this by strengthening and extending state authority and the rule of law to tackle the public security problem posed by the narcoguerrillas.³⁹ In practice, this entailed an increased budget and the size of security forces, as well as tactical improvements (e.g. US-provided helicopter mobility⁴⁰) to regain control over

³¹ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organised Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 170.

³² M.L.R. Smith and David Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), xxii, 2.

³³ *Ibid*, 23.

³⁴ Delgado, "Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building," 408; Afeikhena Jerome, "Lessons from Colombia For Curtailing The Boko Haram Insurgency In Nigeria," *PRISM* 5, no. 2 (2015): 102; Tamara Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum," *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004): 137; Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 101.

³⁵ Michael Shifter and Vinay Jawahar, "State Building in Colombia: Getting Priorities Straight," *Journal of International Affairs* 58, no. 1 (2004): 143.

³⁶ Rosen, *The Losing War*, 24-25.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

³⁸ Andrés González, "La paz en Colombia es solo aparente," in *Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2018*, ed. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, 2018), 286.

³⁹ Shifter and Jawahar, "State Building in Colombia," 146.

⁴⁰ Delgado, "Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building," 414.

the national territory; this was followed by counternarcotics operations (i.e. crop eradication) and governance reform.⁴¹

This policy showcases the clear path dependency of the narcoguerrilla view of FARC. Identifying the problem as poor state capacity compounded by a narcotrafficking plague inevitably leads to a statebuilding solution combined with efficiency reforms and counternarcotics efforts. Of course, this technocratic path dependency does not address the real structural problems that are caused in many ways by the state itself. The nature of this approach (which was inspired by the Malayan Emergency) followed a “clear, hold and build model”⁴², leading various authors to identify ‘democratic security’ as an example of neo-classical COIN.⁴³ There are certainly parallels between ‘Plan Colombia’ and US COIN efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where tactics and operational methods replaced the necessary cohesive and balanced strategic judgement about the nature of the war and the impact of actions on the ground on the broader political environment.⁴⁴

It was US assistance through ‘Plan Colombia’ that made Uribe’s ‘democratic security’ policies possible. ‘Plan Colombia’ formally became the way to ensure the national security of the Colombian state, and protect US interests in the oil rich country and geostrategically-important region.⁴⁵ US funds, hardware and military advisors became integral to the counterinsurgency strategy that sought to target and reduce coca production and forcibly extend the authority of the Colombian state.⁴⁶ However, as Hylton notes, in Colombia, as in Vietnam, “US leaders confused tactics with strategy.”⁴⁷ This certainly explains the emphasis on counternarcotics and why 72% of all resources were directed towards improving Colombia’s police-military capabilities.⁴⁸ As will be shown, misidentifying FARC as a narcoguerrilla group - and viewing Colombia’s problems as the absence of government authority - led to the mistaken belief that its strategic defeat could be achieved via militarisation, counternarcotics and statebuilding. The issues with this approach are outlined below.

The results of ‘Plan Colombia’ and ‘democratic security’ have been a success to the extent that the weakening of the FARC led to their realisation that military victory was unachievable; leading to their commitment to Santos’s peace process.⁴⁹ Violence levels declined significantly as a consequence of the increasing capabilities of the Colombian security forces and their expanded presence across the country.⁵⁰ Impressive operational victories against the FARC were achieved by the Colombian government.⁵¹ However, exploration of the counterinsurgency’s strategic failures reveals that the current difficulties of the peace deal –

⁴¹ Emilio Sánchez, “La seguridad en nuevos escenarios de posconflictos y el papel de las Fuerzas Armadas,” in *Cuadernos de Estrategia 189 – El posconflicto colombiano: una perspectiva transversal*, ed. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, 2017), 137, 139.

⁴² Rosen, *The Losing War*, 56.

⁴³ Delgado, “Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building,” 408, 413; Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency,” 43.

⁴⁴ Delgado, “Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building,” 411.

⁴⁵ Rosen, *The Losing War*, 51; James Petras “Geopolitics of Plan Colombia,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 52/53 (2001): 4617.

⁴⁶ De Boer et al., *Criminal Agendas and Peace Negotiations*, 7.

⁴⁷ Forrest Hylton, “Plan Colombia: The Measure of Success,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2010): 102.

⁴⁸ Paniego, *Lucha contra el narcotráfico*, 16.

⁴⁹ González, “La paz en Colombia es solo aparente,” 286; de Boer et al., *Criminal Agendas and Peace Negotiations*, 8.

⁵⁰ Shifter and Jawahar, “State Building in Colombia,” 146.

⁵¹ Adam Isacson, “Don’t Call it a Model,” Washington Office on Latin America, July 14, 2010, 2, <https://www.wola.org/2010/07/colombia-dont-call-it-a-model>.

and the very real threat of a revival of the FARC⁵² – responds to the same historical dynamics not acknowledged by the counterinsurgents. The military surge enabled by ‘Plan Colombia’ did not cripple nor defeat the FARC as intended. Rather, the insurgents showed their ability to adapt tactically and retain important military capacity⁵³ (around 7,000 fighters in 2013).⁵⁴ In terms of counternarcotics, the efforts were an absolute failure, since cocaine production remained constant throughout the campaign, and it has reached an all-time high in recent years.⁵⁵

These failures are a consequence of the mistaken approach adopted by the US and Colombian governments, which misidentified the key centres of gravity of the CCW, namely FARC’s impoverished rural support base and Colombia’s historical agrarian conflict. This led to the furtherance of the historical statebuilding processes directly responsible for the conflict. The formulation of counterproductive policies like Uribe’s intensification of crop eradication (to target FARC’s income sources) particularly through aerial spraying, had disastrous consequences.⁵⁶ The “largest, most intense and most sustained eradication programme anywhere in the world”⁵⁷ not only failed to reduce cocaine production or bankrupt the FARC, but it destroyed the livelihoods—and health—of peasant communities without providing alternatives, thus deepening their grievances against the state and playing into the FARC narrative.⁵⁸ Eradication repeatedly generated massive FARC-organised social protests in departments like Guaviare, Putumayo and Caquetá, where the FARC had already frequently mobilised hundreds of thousands of peasants in the 1990s.⁵⁹

This grave strategic mistake can be attributed to a failure to understand the role of the drug economy not only in FARC-controlled areas but also in Colombia and its contemporary statebuilding. This is seen in the scandals of President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998)⁶⁰, and in those surrounding the Uribe government’s links with the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary.⁶¹ Because of its importance in the military struggle against FARC⁶², the AUC case exemplifies the strategic failure of ‘Plan Colombia’ in seeing statebuilding and counternarcotics as an overarching solution to Colombia’s problems. Being directly founded and funded by the cartels (and thus playing a major role in narco-trafficking)⁶³, AUC’s violence – and strategic purpose – has followed both the logic of criminal profit and of counterinsurgent political action. In this latter role, the paramilitaries were part of Colombia’s history of land grabbing and state formation⁶⁴ because they have served as protectors of the interests of the major hacendados (large landholders) and other business interests threatened by FARC.⁶⁵

⁵² Megan Janetsky, “How to Keep the Colombian Peace Deal Alive,” *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/08/how-to-keep-the-colombian-peace-deal-alive-farc-duque-uribe-colombia/>.

⁵³ Rosen, *The Losing War*, 142.

⁵⁴ Bruce-Jones and Smith, “Coca, Clausewitz, and Colombia,” 4.

⁵⁵ Andy Gregory, “Global cocaine production reaches all-time high,” *The Independent*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/cocaine-production-record-levels-colombia-unodc-global-drugs-un-report-a8981616.html>.

⁵⁶ Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs,” 973, 991.

⁵⁷ Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 70.

⁵⁸ Rosen, *The Losing War*, 139; Gutiérrez, “Clausewitz Vindicated?,” 230.

⁵⁹ Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 87-88, 106.

⁶⁰ Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs,” 977.

⁶¹ Isacson, “Model,” 4.

⁶² Bruce-Jones and Smith, “Coca, Clausewitz, and Colombia,” 4.

⁶³ Francisco Gutiérrez and Ana Jaramillo, “Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security – the case of Medellín, Colombia,” *Environment & Urbanization* 16, no. 2 (2004): 26.

⁶⁴ Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, 94-95; Isacson, “Model,” 4.

⁶⁵ Jacobo Grajales, “State Involvement, Land Grabbing and Counter-Insurgency in Colombia,” *Development and Change* 44, no. 2 (2013): 211.

Their notorious role in forceful population displacements,⁶⁶ is only one of the multiple contemporary agrarian problems of Colombia. Stark inequalities in landownership and extreme poverty remain very high in rural areas, where 0.4% of landholders control 61.2% of landholdings and 84% of the smallest farms control 4% of productive land.⁶⁷ Historically, the hacendados elites' capital accumulation has depended on the continuous expansion of their holdings into frontier regions⁶⁸, something closely linked to the forceful population displacements have characterised Colombia throughout its history and hold to this day.⁶⁹ During Uribe's term between 2002 and 2010 2 million people were forced from their homes, 300,000 in the year 2009.⁷⁰

'Plan Colombia' and 'democratic security' understood these issues in a technocratic and decontextualised way. This led to the failure to anticipate how the government's military campaigns (and the involvement of the paramilitaries in these) would play into these historical dynamics and continue the process of forceful displacement. Thus, 'Plan Colombia' and Uribe's statebuilding efforts only deepened the agrarian problems that motivated FARC violence. Colombian politics might explain this, as well as the interests behind the narcoguerrilla view. Land reform efforts have seen slow and difficult progress over the years.⁷¹ They have systematically been met with fierce opposition of the hacendados which have blocked most large-scale reforms⁷², in addition to the existing institutional mechanisms for land grabbing entrenched in local power networks.⁷³ As Grajales observes: "the web of legal and illegal practices that characterises land grabbing in Colombia can be interpreted as a historical process of state formation."⁷⁴

Thus, no matter how many development projects or civilian agencies to centralise rural development and foster economic improvements were created⁷⁵, they could not offset the government's military campaigns, which continued the process of forceful displacement and land grabbing. Most notably, military efforts followed a geographic pattern whereby they focused on regions of rising economic importance in which FARC activities or popular activism threatened the interests of local and national investors.⁷⁶ Hylton states that the 'holding' stage of 'Plan Colombia' and 'democratic security' was the "largest land grab in Colombian history"⁷⁷ with 5.5 million hectares of land having been usurped between 1997 and 2007. The fact that Colombia has one of the world's highest number of IDPs (7.7 million since 1985⁷⁸, whose number increased continuously during Uribe's two terms) is evidence of the historical dynamics that 'Plan Colombia' not only failed to acknowledge, but also exacerbated.

In this regard, the 2016 peace deal with the FARC certainly attempted to tackle many of these dynamics, including the key pillar of 'Comprehensive Rural Reform' meant to "change

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Anastasia Moloney, "Latin America has most unequal land distribution, Colombia fares worst: charity," Reuters, November 30, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-latam-landrights/latin-america-has-most-unequal-land-distribution-colombia-fares-worst-charity-idUSKBN13P2NX>; Isacson, "Model," 10.

⁶⁸ Hough, "Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime," 389.

⁶⁹ Bruce-Jones and Smith, "Coca, Clausewitz, and Colombia," 3.

⁷⁰ Isacson, "Model," 12.

⁷¹ Grajales, "State Involvement," 223

⁷² Michael Albertus and Oliver Kaplan, "Land Reform as a Counterinsurgency Policy: Evidence from Colombia," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 2 (2012): 198.

⁷³ Grajales, "State Involvement," 213.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 229.

⁷⁵ Delgado, "Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building," 409.

⁷⁶ Hough, "Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime," 407.

⁷⁷ Hylton, "Plan Colombia," 108.

⁷⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Armed Conflict Survey 2019* (London: Routledge, 2019), 66.

the conditions that have facilitated the persistence of violence.”⁷⁹ The current difficulties faced by the peace are a continuation of the discussed historical trends, particularly the unresolved agrarian conflict. The ambitious 2016 land reform agreement has not even begun implementation, and there is a lack of capacity and political will on the part of the current government of Iván Duque to uphold many other points of the deal.⁸⁰ On top of that, a number of ex-FARC commanders who participated in the peace negotiations have subsequently rearmed and announced a new phase in the armed struggle.⁸¹ If the peace deal finally collapses, it will indicate that the military impasse between government and insurgency, and the leadership of Santos, were not enough to overcome historical tendencies and the power dynamics of the Colombian state. Of course, there are other factors that may play key roles in the failure of the peace, like the various strategic mistakes committed by the FARC over the course of the CCW, which significantly eroded its legitimacy outside its core social base.⁸² Additional research is necessary to determine the role played by FARC in the failure of the peace process.

Conclusion

This article has argued that approaches to insurgency and organised crime like the 'New Wars' thesis or, in the case of Colombia, the narcoguerrilla view, do not conceptualise insurgency and organised crime in a way that allows us to understand the interconnectedness of political and economic agendas and their context-dependency. As a result, these approaches present a superficial and reductionist view of complex conflicts. Instead, insurgency and organised crime can be understood as a continuum in which criminality plays a part in political action and the violence employed by different groups follows a strategic logic. Contrary to the narcoguerrilla view, it has been shown that the FARC did not degenerate into a purely criminal group, and also that even purely criminal groups can participate in the polity's political discourse and generate political capital, even if as a by-product.

Analysing the strategic failures of 'Plan Colombia' and 'democratic security' enables identification of the strategic purpose that counterinsurgent violence had, and how it played into the broader power balance of Colombia. These strategies failed to properly comprehend the key agrarian centres of gravity of the CCW and instead adopted a range of technocratic fixes to narcotics production, governance efficiency and territorial control. As this paper has shown, these were not only unproductive but also deepened and furthered historical trends that made a solution to the key agrarian problems behind the CCW more difficult.

Through this article's framework, the strategic purpose of counterinsurgent violence against the FARC shows that the CCW has a difficult solution. It has been argued that the counterinsurgency plans deepened the drivers of the war by supporting the interests of, for example, the landed powers of the region of Caquetá.⁸³ From this point of view, the counterinsurgency campaign certainly was successful for the economic powers that benefitted from military and paramilitary advances into FARC territory. From the perspective of the US,

⁷⁹ “Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace,” Peace Agreements Database, 10, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/wview/1845/Final%20Agreement%20to%20End%20the%20Armed%20Conflict%20and%20Build%20a%20Stable%20and%20Lasting%20Peace>.

⁸⁰ Dylan Baddour, “UNSC in Colombia to check on implementation of FARC peace deal,” Al Jazeera, July 11, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/unsc-colombia-check-implementation-farc-peace-deal-190711134956472.html>; Janetsky, “Peace.”

⁸¹ Janetsky, “Peace.”

⁸² Gutiérrez, “Clausewitz Vindicated?,” 224.

⁸³ Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime,” 407.

‘Plan Colombia’ was a pyrrhic success in that it degraded FARC’s operational abilities and avoided the failed state scenario threatened by FARC’s peak in power in the early 2000s, yet failed to destroy the group, leaving it able to rearm whilst simultaneously reinforcing the threats posed to the Colombian state by the narcotraffickers and other armed groups. To conclude, the strategic failures of the counterinsurgency in Colombia show that approaching insurgency as organised crime in a dichotomic way leads to developing astrategic, decontextualised and apolitical solutions. These impede understanding the dynamics and nature of a particular political-military context, and to analysing the enemy violence in an astrategic way. The consequence has been a counterinsurgency campaign that has deepened and exacerbated the historical agrarian conflict and the political and economic dynamics that motivated the FARC insurgency.