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Strategic Insights: The Post-Conflict and the Transformation of Colombia's Armed Forces

August 17, 2016 | Dr. R. Evan Ellis

From July 11 to 15, 2015, I had the opportunity to participate in a seminar in Bogota, Colombia, on the topic of transnational organized crime that brought together security sector professionals from 10 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, co-sponsored by U.S. Army South and the Colombian military. The activity occurred on the heels of the June 23rd announcement by the Colombian Government that a final agreement was in sight with the country's largest terrorist organization, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), just days after leaders of the 1st and 7th fronts of the FARC announced that they would not participate in the deal.

Similar to my prior visit to Colombia in March, I found my Colombian colleagues less than excited about the agreement, instead, they were focused on the array of challenges likely to follow. As we discussed their preparations for the post-agreement security environment, I recognized that there was a synergy between those preparations and the long-term efforts of the Colombian military to transform the institution to maximize both their ability to meet near-term challenges, as well as their relevance to the future needs of the nation.

A few subtle, but important, indicators of the way in which the Colombian Armed Forces are preparing for the future are the changes in the terminology that they use to discuss the array of threats to the nation, and highlighting how they see their own role in those struggles. Terrorist groups directly challenging the government, like the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the FARC (until the peace accord is signed), are now referred to as the "Persistent Armed System" (SAP).

The groups once called “criminal bands” (BACRIM) are now separated into two groups: Armed Organized Groups (GAO) and Armed Delinquent Organizations (DAO). The categorization is supported by two new directives from Colombia’s Ministry of Defense, numbers 15 and 16, regarding the circumstances under which the military can legitimately use force against armed groups consistent with international law. Colombia has identified three criminal organizations that fall into these categories: the Gulf Clan (formerly known as the *Úsuga*, and prior to that, the *Urabeños*), the *Pelusos*, and the *Puntilleros* (a group descended from the *ERPAC*). Consistent with the new designation, in November 2015, the Colombian Air Force bombarded an encampment of the Gulf Clan. The new directives also establish a legally defensible framework in which other groups who are currently considered mere delinquent organizations could be designated “Armed Organized Groups” in the future.

The Armed Forces are arguably at the forefront among all Colombians in the hopes that the coming agreement with the FARC brings “peace” to the country, yet it is clear that they also take their responsibility to defend the nation very seriously, preparing to do their part in the next phase of the conflict which is likely to come.

As suggested in the preceding paragraphs, the coming agreement with the FARC represents a transitional moment for the Colombian Armed Forces that will bring both change and continuity to its roles, missions, and the way that it supports the nation. In recognition of these changes (although not exclusively driven by the agreement with the FARC), the Colombian Armed Forces have also engaged in a long-term process of institutional transformation. At the level of the Colombian Army, that process is supported by a dedicated Transformation Command (COTEF), working to ensure that the institution will have the organization, doctrine, and capabilities most relevant for the missions it may be called upon to perform in the future.

As an analyst who spent the early years of my own career supporting U.S. military transformation efforts, I was struck by the parallels between the challenges faced by the United States and Colombia as they implemented their transformation programs. The similarities of these undertakings drew my attention toward the potential for the two nations to work more closely together, and to learn from each other in this area.

For the United States, like Colombia, transformation is driven by both the opportunities, and the imperatives of a changing world.

On one hand, the evolution of technologies in an evolving and increasingly interconnected world make new forms of warfare possible, as well as new military capabilities that might be exploited by the United States, friends, and adversaries, and through the development of innovative new combinations of technologies, forms of organization, and ways of operating. As in all periods of human history, pursuing such

possibilities is not a matter of “ugly militarism,” but the responsibility of any government and its armed forces to protect its people, given that those same factors are also changing the threat environment and creating new possibilities for state and non-state adversaries against which the government must be prepared.

Yet, making decisions about which of the numerous possibilities to concentrate on, those that would be most appropriate against the equally vast array of emerging threats, has always been a human and a bureaucratic endeavor as much as a scientific one.

In this context, forward thinking U.S. defense organizations, such as the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Net Assessment under Andrew Marshall and, later, the Office of Force Transformation under Admiral Arthur Cebrowski, helped to advance thinking and prepare a generation of officers to transform their military institutions.

While transformation has always been, in part, about recognizing and exploiting opportunities, the United States was also “pushed” into transformation by changing global and budgetary realities. The end of the Cold War, the associated downsizing of the U.S. military, and an emerging new array of non-state challenges made transformation a necessity to maintain the necessary capabilities to defend the nation in a changing world in the context of a shrinking force.

Despite large bureaucracies of competent professionals and contractors, a sophisticated methodology for capability-based planning (supported by intimidatingly complex PowerPoint graphics), and transformation “roadmaps” developed by each of the services, truth be told, the end goals of transformation continuously shifted.

While participating in DoD transformation efforts from 1994 until after the second Gulf War, including an array of wargames, studies, programs, and roadmaps, I concluded that transformation efforts have been adapted to emerging real-world challenges more often than they have anticipated them.

The uncertain post-agreement environment that the Colombian military faces is not unlike that faced by the United States at the end of the Cold War. I am confident that the very innovative, intelligent, and professional men and women of the Colombian Armed Forces will work arduously to develop new and enhanced capabilities while adjusting their organizations, doctrine, and training to be as relevant and effective as possible in the evolving threat environment of the Andean region, the Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and Central America.

As with the United States, I am equally confident that the Colombian military will have to make its case domestically, regarding why, in a post-FARC environment, it should not be downsized. If its budget is indeed cut, which is likely but not advisable, like the United

States, it will be forced to innovate to perform the new array of missions required of it with fewer personnel and resources.

Since institutional change is both costly and disruptive, Colombia like the United States, will also struggle with how to develop the required new capabilities, while continuing to meet existing obligations, without breaking the nation's proven and vitally important military institutions.

Some of the outlines of Colombia's transformation efforts are already apparent. As noted previously, its Armed Forces seek to support the implementation of the forthcoming demobilization and disarmament agreements with the FARC while preparing to fight the evolving set of challenges to come. Colombia also hopes to share its successful experience against the FARC and ELN through education and training activities with its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors, thereby helping to "export security" to the region.

While it is not clear that Colombia will require a smaller military than it has today, it will arguably require a force with a very different structure. The Colombian Army, for example, has developed brigades specialized in kidnap response and it is developing a new brigade specialized to combat illegal mining. Beyond such initiatives, the future Colombian military will also likely require fewer forces optimized for combat in the nation's remote mountainous and jungle regions, and they will need to be better equipped for the complex challenge of operations against criminal groups embedded in civilian populations, similar to an expanded version of its urban combat companies. It will also likely rely more on civil affairs capabilities, such as its innovative and successful "integrated action" brigades, which contribute to integrated, multi-ministry efforts to develop the country while strengthening the government's strategically critical ties to the population.

As suggested by the parallels between the United States and Colombian transformation challenges, there are many possibilities for the United States to leverage its own experience with force transformation to support Colombia's efforts. Doing so represents an opportunity for both countries to take their longstanding partnership in a new direction while also challenging both to engage with each other across institutions different than those of the past.

Traditionally, U.S. support to Colombia's Armed Forces has occurred through Department of Defense (DoD) organizations such as the 7th Group of U.S. Special Operations Command, or the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). Both primarily provide training to enhance traditional military capabilities.

However, working together on transformation ideally will involve a dialogue between Colombia's military and key officials in the Department of Defense, the Joint staff, and service staff organizations that traditionally have only limited contact with U.S. partner nations in Latin America. Examples at the Army level include: the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC); the Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCIC), which leads in developing future Army concepts; the Army Center of Excellence, which captures innovative ideas from the field and brings them through ARCIC; the Army G-3/5/7 organization, which is the entry point for the development of new requirements associated with items such as doctrine, structure, and material and equipment; and the G-8 force development office (DAPR-FDJ), which works to align new Army requirements with the Joint force through the Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC). The Colombian and U.S. militaries could also usefully engage on transformation through their respective strategic-level war colleges, insofar as that the U.S. Army War College teaches and conducts research on future warfare and Army force planning issues. Such a preliminary tie already exists between the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute and its Colombian counterpart, the Center for Regional Strategic Security Studies (CREES).

Beyond DoD, a wealth of institutional memory regarding U.S. force transformation efforts resides in the private sector where retired military officers and other experts have contributed to both the innovative thinking and institutional tasks that drove the U.S. force transformation efforts of the 1990s and 2000s.

There are many insights that such interactions can offer both sides, including the U.S. experience with respect to future force-oriented wargaming, requirements, and acquisition methodologies, as well as planning for the institutional changes necessary to support transformation, such as those in training, education, doctrine, military personnel systems, logistics, and maintenance, among others. It is not only important for the United States to share its successes, but also, to provide the lessons learned from mistakes and the pitfalls that should be avoided.

Reciprocally, as the United States prepares for a new generation of engagement involving military operations against dispersed and decentralized enemies in complex sociopolitical environments throughout the world, the Colombian experience in rebuilding connectivity between its Armed Forces, the government, and its people, has a great deal of instructive value for the United States.

Such ties have the potential to do much good, not only in advancing the processes of institutional innovation for both Armies, but also in moving the longstanding and close U.S.-Colombia relationship toward mutually beneficial new terrain.

My conversations with my Colombian counterparts in Bogota assured me that knowledgeable and forward-thinking professionals are indeed planning for the range of challenges that may accompany the signing of an agreement with the FARC and the challenges that Colombia will face in the more distant future. The United States has both an interest and obligation to ensure that Colombia succeeds in that journey. Strategically, Colombia's success as a well-institutionalized, pro-Western nation contributes strongly to stability and democratic governance in the region. Equally important, the rest of the region and the world will be watching to see how the United States stands by a partner that has invested its faith in the United States in its time of need.

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