

# The Perils of Simultaneous COIN and Counternarcotics in Peru and Colombia

Written by Barnett S. Koven

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BARNETT S. KOVEN, APR 28 2014

Peru and Colombia continue to be threatened by virulent insurgent groups having clear ties to narcotics trafficking. In Peru, the current threat is from the guerilla group 'the Shining Path', whereas in Colombia, the most significant threat is from FARC-EP (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army). Both groups were originally constituted as leftist – Maoist and Marxist-Leninist, respectively – insurgents. Over time these organizations' revolutionary ideologies gave way, at least in practice, to 'narco-capitalism' (Koven and McClintock forthcoming; Koven 2014).

In Peru and Colombia, the increasing integration between battle-hardened insurgent groups and narcotics trafficking is concerning, especially given that narcotics trafficking has yielded windfall profits for the two insurgencies. In April 2012, the Peruvian government arrested Alex Gutiérrez Mantari on suspicion of laundering more than \$100 million of the VRAEM (Valley of the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro Rivers) faction's ill-gotten gains. Even more unsettling is the fact that Mantari is suspected of being merely one of many employed by the faction to launder money (Koven and McClintock forthcoming). In Colombia, FARC-EP profits from narcotics trafficking are considerably higher than those of the Shining Path. It is estimated that cumulative revenue from the FARC-EP's narcotics trafficking ventures totals in the tens of billions of dollars (Koven 2014). In both cases, these funds have been used to purchase advanced armaments and to invest in organization and training. The Peruvian police recovered 6,200 armaments and 860 explosives from the Shining Path in 2007. In 2012, one raid uncovered 12,000 sticks of dynamite and a subsequent raid produced not only dynamite and ammunition, but also rockets (Koven and McClintock forthcoming). In 1999, the FARC-EP appears to have corrupted high-ranking Peruvian military officers (including Peruvian spy-master Vladimiro Montesinos) who purchased 10,000 AK-47 assault rifles from the Jordanian Government – purportedly for use by the Peruvian armed forces – and then proceeded to airdrop the rifles into FARC-EP controlled territory (Yagoub 2014, Forero 2004). The FARC-EP has also invested in systematic training programs for infantry soldiers, regularized physical training regiments, and the formation and training of sophisticated military intelligence units; all of which are activities seen only amongst modern national militaries and a select few of the best funded insurgencies (Koven 2014).

### Combating the Threat

Given the potent combination of these insurgent groups with massive funding from narcotics, both governments have attempted to combat the issue through a combined counterinsurgency (COIN) and counternarcotics (CN) strategy. At first glance, this appears to be an extremely logical strategy. This is the case given that the COIN portion of the strategy directly targets the insurgents, while the CN side of the strategy aims to cut off the guerrillas' main funding source. In reality, COIN and CN strategies are at odds with each other.

In *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Mao Tse-tung comments on the relationship that must exist between civilian populations and successful insurgent forces. Mao writes, "[t]he former [civilians] may be likened to water and the latter [insurgents] to the fish who inhabit it" (Mao 1961, 92-3). In other words, insurgencies are only able to operate so long as they maintain the support of the local population in their areas of operation. Most insurgencies – including extraordinarily well-armed ones – recognize that they cannot win in a set piece battle against even a relatively small

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national military. Instead, the guerrillas operate by blending into the local population and relying on locals for assistance (U.S. Army and Marine Corps 2006, 13). At the limit, this assistance includes providing new recruits, but it also includes providing food and shelter and, critically, sharing information on government troop movements in the area. Recognizing that the center of gravity in COIN warfare rests with the civilian population, modern population-centric COIN doctrine emphasizes the need for the counterinsurgent to win-over the civilian population (U.S. Army and Marine Corps 2006).

Current doctrine, as epitomized by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps' Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24), suggests three critical tenets for winning-over this uncommitted middle. These include providing security such that the civilian population can (relatively) safely cooperate with the counterinsurgent. In addition to security, FM 3-24 also recommends that governance reforms be enacted and development aid disbursed in order to address any grievances the population may have against the counterinsurgents (U.S. Army and Marine Corps 2006). In short, winning at COIN entails separating the civilian population from the guerrillas. Just as fish cannot survive out of water, insurgents cannot operate independently of a civilian base.

CN strategy, on the other-hand, primarily entails eradication. In Peru and Colombia, this often involved highly damaging aerial spraying and manual destruction of coca crops (Marquis and Forero 2004). Occasionally, alternative development programs were also used. For example, Colombia experimented with the Forest Ranger Families Program, a conditional cash transfer program which paid peasant farmers of coca to manually eradicate coca plants and replant native plant life (Koven 2010, 5-6). Unfortunately, alternative development programs are destined to fail unless they fully subsidize the income gap between coca and the highest paying legal crop that can be planted in a given area. In practice, they have all failed to do so. Often, the coca cultivators are neither hardened criminals nor insurgents, but peasant families who are only able to maintain a meager living by growing illicit crops. By destroying the livelihoods of peasant farmers, eradication programs drive civilians into the open arms of local insurgents. Rather than accomplish their mission, CN operations run afoul of COIN doctrine in that they alienate the uncommitted middle from the counterinsurgent, and strengthen the relationship between the guerrillas and the civilian population.

## **Changing Course**

Given that simultaneously employing COIN and CN operations is counterproductive, what are the Peruvian and Colombian governments to do? In both countries, the larger concern is the insurgent movements, not drug cultivation and trafficking itself. This is the case for at least three reasons. First, insurgents are directly responsible for violence and are committed to presenting a continued armed challenge to the state. Unlike the insurgents, coca cultivators and others involved in the production of narcotics in Peru and Colombia do not have any *prima facie* reason to resort to violence against the state and its agents, provided the state does not attempt to curtail their activities. Second, while drug consumption is associated with social ills such as petty theft and violence among users, this is largely a foreign problem. The vast majority of Peruvian and Colombian cocaine is consumed in the U.S. and Western Europe, and not in Peru or Colombia (Koven 2014). Third, it is evident that Peruvian president Ollanta Humala – himself a former military officer – is principally concerned by the fact that an insurgent force and not the state maintains a monopoly on the use of force in territory within the Peruvian state (Koven and McClintock forthcoming). No doubt, the Colombian government shares similar concerns, given that the territorial control of the FARC-EP is far greater than that of the VRAEM faction.<sup>[1]</sup> Consequently, exclusive focus should be given to COIN operations, and CN initiatives should be tabled until after the insurgencies have been mopped up.

## **Conclusion**

This article argues that simultaneously pursuing COIN and CN operations is an ineffective way of combating insurgent violence fueled by narco-funding. This is the case because while successful COIN requires 'winning the hearts and minds' of the uncommitted middle, CN operations alienate precisely this group. Undoubtedly, the insurgents pose a larger domestic threat than narcotics production. Therefore, the optimal strategy would be to target the insurgents without pursuing eradication. Unfortunately, this strategy is politically challenging and risks alienating the U.S. – given its paramount focus on the 'War on Drugs' – which is the principal source for Peruvian and Colombian support in their efforts against the VRAEM faction of the Shining Path and FARC-EP. Nevertheless,

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numerous Latin American leaders, including Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos, characterized the U.S.-led War on Drugs as a failure and sought to discuss alternative ways forward with the U.S. at the 2012 Summit of the Americas (Parsons and Gold 2012).

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[1] While the exact size of the territory in which each group operates is difficult to pin down, it is almost certain that the territorial reach of FARC-EP is far greater than that of the VRAEM faction of the Shining Path. A map of the FARC-EP's territorial presence in 2008 covers (very roughly) a fifth of Colombia's territory (International Crisis Group). Whereas a risk assessment map of Peru between January 2008 and March 2014 shows that the VRAEM faction of the Shining Path is localized to only a very small portion of the country (note that this map overstates the current threat as it also illustrates the threat which was posed by the Upper Huallaga Valley faction, which has since been defeated) (Maplecroft Global Risk Analytics).

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## About the author:

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