

Armed Conflict and Agreement with the FARC: The Role of the Colombian Air Force – FAC

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This paper aims to describe the operational transformation of the Colombian army since the 1990s. Special emphasis is placed on the role of the Fuerza Aerea Colombiana – FAC (Colombian Air Force) in the development of the armed conflict and the strategy against drug trafficking that took place in South America. Between 1999 and 2006, the most important and significant air operations in the country’s history took place, developing an offensive strategy that guaranteed a greater capacity for effective control of the regions. This prevented illegal groups from consolidating themselves on the basis of a “war of movements” that would have allowed them to take control of vast areas of the territory. Partly thanks to these operational results, sufficient incentives and pressure were generated as a result of which, before its demobilisation, the guerrilla group with the greatest impact in the country (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – FARC) moved towards a political agreement with Juan Manuel Santos’s government. Finally, taking into account the current challenges, such as the ongoing post-agreement in Colombia, this paper reflects on the need for a transition in the army from a counterinsurgency force to a multi-mission force that considers the implementation of Human Security as a complement to traditional security.

Keywords: Air Force, armed conflict, national security, Human Security

Introduction

According to Article 217 of the 1991 Political Constitution of Colombia, the primary purpose of the military institution is to defend the sovereignty, independence, integrity of the national territory and the constitutional order.² This mandate was constantly put to the test due to the internal armed conflict that has plagued the country since the 1960s. This conflict involved multiple actors who, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, called into question the legitimacy and sovereign power of the State. The 1990s and 2000s were characterised by the development of military intelligence and technological development

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² Constitución Política de Colombia 1991.

to confront illegal armed groups, as well as counter-guerrilla military training and a securitarian political stance on the part of central governments. These factors had a direct impact on the generation of capacities to transform the dynamics of the conflict, which translated into operational successes and changes in security dynamics.³

Such transformative initiatives of military strengthening, which produced strategic results in weakening the FARC, the guerrilla group with the greatest impact prior to the 2016 Peace Accords, were motivated by a sense of emergency generated after the frustrated negotiations during the government of Andrés Pastrana with this guerrilla group.⁴ These negotiations included the clearance of part of the national territory (Distension Zones) for the FARC to settle (later considered a sort of failed state within the national territory where the fundamental rights of the region's inhabitants were violated. There were reports of raids, undue detentions of people, cattle rustling, extortions, kidnappings and murders).⁵ This failure preceded a hardening of the National Defence and Security perspective, as well as changes in the way the Military Forces and in particular the Colombian Air Force operated.⁶

The invigoration of the armed forces was reflected in their capacity to influence the dynamics of the conflict in operational contexts (such as Operation Angel Flight or Operation Colombia) in which air power was especially decisive. The National Government's strengthening of the armed forces, providing resources, infrastructure, modernisation of technical equipment and actively seeking international cooperation, especially from the United States, meant prioritising a perspective that understands security from an offensive strategic position as a State problem that, according to this perspective, could not depend on the diagnosis and posture of the governments in power.⁷

In the following, the emergence of insurgent groups and drug trafficking as threats to state security will be mentioned, as well as the different transformations experienced by the Colombian Armed Forces (especially the Air Forces) to combat them. Finally, for discussion, reference will be made to Human Security as an effective tool against emerging threats beyond the military. It is a concept from which it is possible to think of an army multimission focused on the need to protect people and not only state sovereignty, and which includes aspects of security that are not limited to military confrontation, related to generating conditions in which communities scourged by decades of violence and State neglect can live in dignity.

Overall, the questions that arise and are addressed in this text are, on the one hand, to what extent the strengthening of military forces, and in particular the air power, can be considered a decisive factor in the disarmament of the former FARC, as well as the future prospects for the role that the army could play in the post-conflict period. The methodology used to address this problem was the compilation, review and analysis of documents in order to contextualise the questions, as well as a search of the written press, data and

³ RÍOS 2018: 479.

⁴ RÍOS 2018: 481.

⁵ ARIZA 2014.

⁶ ECHEVERRY 2019: 88.

⁷ MALAGÓN 2019: 177.

reports issued by both civilian and military organisations, with the aim of carrying out a balanced analysis of the issue that includes different sectors.

Context: Colombia's armed conflict and the rise of drug trafficking

Outlaw groups, drug trafficking and illegal air movement

When what is now known as Colombia's internal armed conflict broke out in 1961, the country was struggling to overcome another conflict in which the traditional two-party system was the main actor that dominated the country's history between 1946 and 1953, a period characterised by armed confrontations between supporters of the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party.⁸ Then, in the 1960s, on the one hand, a group of peasants who were making social demands (they denounced the State's abandonment, instability, violence and political exclusion) and, on the other hand, in the 1970s, a group of students and political activists decided to arm themselves with the aim of rising to power. This led to the creation of outlaw groups known as the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), ELN (National Liberation Army), EPL (Popular Liberation Army) and M-19 (19th of April Movement) guerrillas, which began to launch attacks against the Colombian State.⁹

With respect to the FARC (the guerrilla with the greatest impact), they established contacts with organised crime that gave it access to the clandestine arms trade, for example, drug-for-arms exchanges (such exchanges probably explain why the FARC sent representatives to Mexico in 2000 to make contact with the "Tijuana cartel"). They also have links with Venezuelan arms dealers who supplied them with small arms and large quantities of ammunition. Historically, it is possible to point to relations (for supply and training) with revolutionary groups established during the Cold War, such as the Salvadoran Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the Japanese Red Army (ERJ) and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). In addition, the subversive group found sources of arms supplies through a global network that uses the countries surrounding Colombia (Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela) as transit points.¹⁰

During the 1990s, there were various military onslaughts, especially by the FARC. At that time, the State had problems maintaining its legitimate monopoly on violence. The illegal groups understood the strategic need to control the territories and carried out different attacks, especially in the south of the country. These attacks had a common factor: they were prolonged confrontations with heavy weaponry (artillery), and the military objectives were strategic. In addition, also in the 1990s, the illegal organisation in question operated under the "war of movements" strategy of the Prolonged People's War (GPP), which allowed them to group together and attack specialised military units. The

⁸ ÁLVAREZ 2013: 8.

⁹ M. A. BARÓN 2019: 203.

¹⁰ ORTIZ 2002: 138.

attacks on Las Delicias, El Billar, Miraflores and Mitú show that the guerrillas wanted to control these territories in order to create and maintain a corridor of mobility towards the borders of Venezuela and Brazil.¹¹

The seizure of Mitú (in 1998) was of great strategic value because it was a departmental capital in a key area that would allow the FARC to strengthen their political position at the negotiating table with the Pastrana Government, as well as to demonstrate to the State and the Armed Forces their military capacity and territorial control. By controlling the territory, they would show the international community their military capacity with the aim of obtaining belligerent status. The illegal organisation was wearing down the State by carrying out attacks throughout the national territory, and in this sense, with the capture of Mitú they were sending a political message (indication that they were in the whole territory), unlike the State, whose presence in several zones was questionable.¹²

But the insurgent group's presence in the territories was quite complex and not limited to military presence. In order to explain the relations between civilians and the FARC, it is necessary to highlight the process of flexibilisation that this group was forced to undergo after the end of the Cold War. In 1992, the signing of peace with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador can be seen as an event that marked the conclusion of the Cold War in Latin America. This demobilisation of what was then considered the strongest insurgent force on the continent was seen as a sign that indicated the definitive death of guerrilla movements in the region. However, the FARC, far from weakening, quickly adapted to the new strategic scenario, taking advantage of the opportunities created by the emerging post-war international arena.¹³

In this transition, the group in question abandoned many of the characteristics associated with traditional Latin American armed organisations. For example, from an ideological point of view, the vast majority of these organisations defined themselves as followers of some variant of communism. However, the FARC gradually abandoned Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy and replaced it with a less rigid ideological package, moving from criticising the legitimacy of the State's origin to questioning its functional legitimacy. This allowed them to dissociate themselves from the communist crisis, as their new political agenda did not propose the transformation of the State according to ideological principles, but the construction of a new, more efficient one. In this sense, they began to present and configure themselves as a parallel State, a provider of social services, which gave them some community support.¹⁴

In terms of access to weapons, Latin American guerrillas had to rely on governments with similar ideologies for logistical support. In late 1989, the United States pressured the USSR to reduce the flow of weapons to insurgents' groups. In this respect, the FARC's strategic transition allowed it to gain autonomy in decisive areas that have provided it with a logistical chain free of dependency, especially to develop heavy weaponry without the need for substantial foreign State sponsorship. To this end, they managed to achieve a state

¹¹ M. A. BARÓN 2019: 203.

¹² M. A. BARÓN 2019: 203.

¹³ ORTIZ 2002: 127.

¹⁴ ORTIZ 2002: 131.

of total self-financing mainly through their links with drug trafficking. It should be made clear that in general terms, the insurgents had been less involved in the sale of narcotics, this phase of the drug business have been mainly in the hands of specialised criminal groups. Instead, they were in charge of providing peasants and traffickers (in return for “taxes” paid) with services such as justice, maintenance of public order and defence against army and police operations.¹⁵ The guerrillas’ links with drug trafficking have not only provided them with important economic benefits, but have also ensured significant support from sectors of the peasant population dedicated to coca leaf cultivation. The latter, given that in areas far from the centres of power where the state’s presence is not felt, coca becomes the only product in sufficient demand for buyers to come directly to collect it. The unpaved roads in coca-growing areas mean that farmers are unable to transport other products to the nearest cities, which are many hours away, so they see coca cultivation as the only viable way to survive.¹⁶

Now then, drug trafficking is part of a chain that involves not only guerrillas but also counter-guerrilla or self-defence groups, organised crime (drug cartels and Organised Armed Groups) and even army members and regional political clans.¹⁷ It began with the marimba bonanza in the Guajira region (the northernmost department of the country) in the 1970s.¹⁸ This phenomenon shifted from the production of coca leaf to the production of coca paste and cocaine hydrochloride and exponentially increasing the profits. The illegal economies have taken advantage of the facilities generated by air movement and the existing weaknesses in the control by the authorities.¹⁹ Those involved in the drug trafficking business have designed different manoeuvres to move their merchandise to strategic distribution and commercialisation points. In the 1980s (at the beginning of the drug trafficking boom), the most common means of transport was by land, but due to the excessive time required for mobilisation and the fact that it was the most controlled by the public forces, drug traffickers used maritime and aerial means to carry out their illegal movements, the latter being the fastest and with the greatest coverage.²⁰

Regarding the situation of illegal flights in Colombia, in 2003 there were an average of almost two flights per day in which drugs were trafficked to bordering countries. Including air transport alone, it can be inferred that 639 tons were transported during that year.²¹ The income of the cartels was substantial and allowed them, through the same routes, to move narcotics to the U.S. and to bring weapons and money on the return trip, thus completing the commercial cycle. In 2003, the illegal organisations received 16.87% of Colombia’s GDP, which shows that the capacity of the State was at risk, especially in terms of its legitimacy and performance in society.²²

¹⁵ ORTIZ 2002: 137.

¹⁶ GONZALEZ 2017: 46.

¹⁷ GUTIÉRREZ-CIRO 2022.

¹⁸ BARRIOS 2020: 152.

¹⁹ KAUTILYA 2008.

²⁰ DEVIA-FERREIRA 2015: 3.

²¹ U.S. Department of State 2004.

²² BARRIOS 2020: 101.

The role of the Air Force in the course of the armed conflict

Development and innovation

In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet hegemony in the Eastern Hemisphere, the United States emerged as the victorious superpower in the international system supported by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) countries. The giant of the North saw the need to rethink its military strategy from the first decade of the 21st century, deepening the reforming wave of its Armed Forces with attention to the new “threats”, standing out, in terms of security and defence, drug trafficking and “terrorism”.²³

In this context, on 13 June 2000, *Plan Colombia* entered the scene as a law sanctioned by former U.S. President Bill Clinton to provide support, especially in the military field, to the South American nation in the context of the internal armed conflict and drug trafficking. This plan was totally in line with former President Alvaro Uribe’s policy of weakening “terrorist” organisations through military operations. The U.S. Government was emphatic in the imperative need to double military expenditures by the Colombian State in order to achieve a better development of the joint strategy. During the two Uribe Administrations, indeed, the military percentage of GDP increased considerably, to the point of being able to use the term “militarised budget”. Military expenditures between 2002 and 2010 went from 11,003 billion to 23,065 billion, an annual growth of 4.76%. Between 2002 and 2010, Colombia had the highest military spending figures in the South American continent.²⁴

Thus, three new divisions were established (VI Division, VII Division and VIII Division), as well as six High Mountain Battalions, sixty Counter-Guerrilla Battalions, eleven groups of urban anti-terrorist Special Forces, nine regular battalions, fourteen service and combat support companies and new National Police garrisons. As for the Colombian Air Force – FAC, its operational capacity was expanded due to the acquisition of aircraft and helicopters, including twenty-five Brazilian A-292 and thirteen Israeli K-fir.²⁵ In addition, in 2011, the FAC surpassed several indicators of the previous decade, such as the number of hours flown (87,692), aircraft readiness (73.5%, being the world average 70%) and the largest fleet size (319 aircraft) achieved by the country. It also included the adoption of night vision systems and Super Tucano aircraft, as well as laser-guided bombs.²⁶

Another essential aspect in the strengthening of the institution was to implement the air power principle of “centralised control and decentralised execution”. This system integrated all intelligence, planning, execution and operational control activities, as well as the technological elements of communications, information technologies, radar signals, sensors and intelligence platforms, under the Air Force Command and Control Center and its subordinate organisations. This allowed the commander to have control of all

²³ GONZÁLEZ–BETANCOURT 2018: 74.

²⁴ TAMAYO 2015.

²⁵ SCHULTZE-KRAFT 2012: 411.

²⁶ TRIANA 2019: 60.

operations, to properly exploit the flexibility, speed, precision and versatility of air power and to incorporate International Humanitarian Law throughout the operational structure. The latter facilitated the use of force within the constitutional and legal framework by defining the rules of engagement, mission accomplished reports, closed control of drug interdiction operations and the operational information system.²⁷

Fighting the guerrilla

The process of transformation and modernisation during the 1990s and 2000s, mentioned in the previous section, made it possible for the Colombian Air Force to develop air operations that allowed the deactivation of the territorial strategies of the illegal armed groups, leading to the demobilisation of the armed structures of the FARC and the strategic weakening of other organisations.²⁸ Of particular note is the demobilisation of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – AUC, paramilitary groups which were built as an illegal counter-insurgency response, with the complicity and support of ranchers, local political elites and members of the army,²⁹ and that have been the most lethal actors in the conflict in terms of massacres of the civilian population.³⁰

Back to the guerrillas, Air power made it possible to overcome the irregular practice developed by FARC of using explosive devices to prevent ground troops from advancing rapidly along different corridors of the country. The articulation and coordination between the Forces was fundamental because it facilitated the triangulation and complementation of available intelligence information, making it increasingly clear the locations of the leaders and key men of the FARC fronts, as well as the plans and purposes of the organisation, which was fundamental for striking the hardest military blows.³¹ In this regard, it is worth highlighting the coordination between the Air Force and the National Police, which achieved the sequential neutralisation of 88 FARC leaders, 50 ELN leaders and 123 organised crime leaders between 2006 and 2017.³²

Operation Colombia in 1990 is considered by the Military Forces to be one of the most important historical milestones in the country's armed conflict. The National Army troops attacked an area covering a large region of the department of Meta to dismantle the FARC's General Staff and Secretariat. The pilots faced multiple challenges to operate in an environment where topographical conditions and the guerrilla group's own response made any attempt by an aircraft to enter the area extremely difficult.³³ Although the operation did not achieve any convincing blow against the organisation (and even dispersed the guerrillas throughout the national territory), the operation showed the capacity of the pilots who, from military planes and Air Force helicopters, allowed the Army to reach one

²⁷ ABAZÚA 2014: 55–63.

²⁸ ECHEVERRY 2019: 89.

²⁹ GARCÍA 2005.

³⁰ Historical Memory Group 2016: 42.

³¹ MALAGÓN 2019: 177.

³² Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2018: 62.

³³ L. I. BARÓN 2019: 103.

of the FARC's most emblematic points, managing to erase this guerrilla sanctuary from the map.³⁴

In 1998, Operation Angel's Flight, launched by the Colombian Air Force to retake Mitú, turned out to have a key role, since thanks to the use of aerospace instruments it was possible to alter the armed group's asymmetries. In this operation, the latest technology incorporated by the Air Force was used and tested, such as night vision goggles (NVG), the FLIR system (Forward Looking Infrared), *perifoneo* and precision shooters from aircraft (Teplas).³⁵ The operation also succeeded in changing the guerrillas' military strategy. Mitú was the last town that the FARC tried to hold and remain. As they realised that being grouped together exposed them to air power, they had to change the strategy of war of movement to return to ambushes and other tactics typical of guerrilla warfare in order to be able to carry out attacks against the State.³⁶ It is not a coincidence that the percentage of municipalities attacked by illegal groups increased in 2012 and 2013 by 8%.³⁷

On the other hand, in 2002, precision bombing allowed to recover the clearance zone in a short time, and since 2007 it has made it possible to weaken the illegal group in successive operations. The Air Force guaranteed superiority by carrying out attack and aerial intelligence, command and control missions, among others.³⁸ The decreasing trend of the numbers, from 33 to only 2 or 0 operations, showed that the Air Force contributed not only to decimate such groups in each event but also to progressively deter other attacks on populations.³⁹ This downward trend made it possible to adjust the means to intensify strategic attacks between 2006 and 2007. Since 2007, precision bombing has been used against the leaders and regularly against the illegal groups' camps and infrastructure. More recently, in 2015, bombings against factions of the group in Cauca and Chocó neutralised 54 of their troops.⁴⁰

When announcing the beginning of the peace talks in 2012, the government argued that they were an effect of the decisive operations of the security forces during the previous decade. In February of the same year, the *Espada de Honor* (Sword of Honour) war plan began to be implemented, the initial objective of which was to dismantle the armed groups and their base areas; in other words, the missions would not only focus on the leaders but especially on the structures and their support networks.⁴¹ During that year, only 41% of these structures were able to carry out any armed action.⁴² The illegal groups, reduced in numbers and initiative, withdrew to small areas of refuge.⁴³

The conduct of close air support operations, characteristic of the typical ground counter-power mission, is also noteworthy. As such, air support offered protection and

³⁴ Infobae 2020.

³⁵ LESMES 2019: 114.

³⁶ M. A. BARÓN 2019: 204.

³⁷ Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2015.

³⁸ TRIANA 2019: 63.

³⁹ Colombian Air Force – FAC 2008.

⁴⁰ TRIANA 2019: 61.

⁴¹ Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2018: 76–79.

⁴² Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2013: 14.

⁴³ Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2018: 76–79.

tactical advantage to ground troops in combat;⁴⁴ which means that the Air Force has been essential in the operations of the Army, the Marines and the Police. Between 2011 and 2012, it had to intensify such support either in the campaign against drug trafficking or within the *Espada de Honor* Plan.⁴⁵ These advances between national institutions were coupled with intelligence cooperation between the United States and the Colombian Government, managed by a CIA program.⁴⁶ Although as early as 1984, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Lewis Tambs denounced the nexus between illegal armed groups and drug trafficking, it was only in November 2002 that the Bush Administration authorised U.S. assistance against drug trafficking in Colombia to be used against the insurgency as well.⁴⁷ The influx of information, coupled with the political will of both nations due to shared security interests, was crucial to hit the FARC in previously inaccessible areas.⁴⁸

In short, it was demonstrated that air capabilities allowed the military forces to have an effective presence and control not only in the airspace but also in the national territory, which led to the privileging and strengthening of air power in the Colombian internal armed conflict.⁴⁹ The strategic power of this force has been recognised by the National Center of Historical Memory: “A fundamental measure to contain the guerrilla advance was the strengthening of air power. [...] Air power became for the FFMM (Military Forces) a tactical advantage that transformed the correlation of forces between the State and the guerrillas.”⁵⁰

Control of drug trafficking

The Colombian Air Force is in charge of keeping under control that illegal flights do not take place in the National Airspace. The fight against drug trafficking by air began with the first activities in 1990 with the full support of the U.S. Government, whose interest, to keep its territory free of the scourge of drugs, led it to work with non-adjacent countries to establish direct action on an activity that “affects” its security and in which no third states intervened. That could serve as a buffer area to try to control the entry of narcotics, since the practice at the time consisted of dumping drug shipments at sea or in unpopulated areas of the territory to be recovered by the outlawed organisations.⁵¹

As part of the efforts to take the necessary actions at the national level, the competent agencies that could assist in interdiction were involved. Service agreements were established with entities such as the Anti-Narcotics Police, the Civil Aviation Control Group, the Attorney General’s Office and the Special Administrative Unit of Civil Aeronautics. Routes, illegal runways and aircraft were prioritised, establishing patterns

⁴⁴ Colombian Air Force – FAC 2020: 6.

⁴⁵ TRIANA 2019: 63.

⁴⁶ RIASCOS 2019: 274.

⁴⁷ TRIANA 2019: 64.

⁴⁸ RIASCOS 2019: 274.

⁴⁹ LESMES 2019: 115.

⁵⁰ Historical Memory Group 2017: 102.

⁵¹ BARRIOS 2020: 96.

of conduct that allowed to increase the effectiveness of interdiction. This made it easier to take the first steps towards a strategy that would guarantee the control of airspace, initially at the national level and later establishing alliances, not only with neighbouring countries but also with countries with non-adjacent borders. With the latter, procedures were standardised and communication channels were established that made it possible to have an impact on illegal air movement.⁵²

In this context, overflights by USAF AWAC, P-3B and USCUSTOMS C-550 aircraft, with Colombian, Peruvian and Ecuadorian Air Defence operators on board, were undertaken in an effort to achieve synergy in the interdiction of aircraft and vessels crossing the Wider Caribbean northbound. However, this effort fell far short of the surveillance and monitoring needs of that area.⁵³ During 2003, the U.S. loaned Colombia 3 Cessna Citation 560 aircraft, platforms to track illegal and drug trafficking aircraft. The areas of this aerial control included the borders with Brazil, Panama, Peru and Venezuela, and the Caribbean Sea. The Air Force managed to reduce illegal flights using Colombian airspace from 639 suspicious traces detected in 2003 to 6 in 2014,⁵⁴ from 2003 to 2013 there was a 96.8% reduction in illegal air movements.⁵⁵

Similarly, at the same time that illegal flights were reduced, the Air Force increased its effectiveness against the means used by drug traffickers. It went from immobilising 12 aircraft (2005) to 113 (2013) and from disabling 7 (2005) to 43 (2013) aircraft. Since 2007, the interdiction programme has been extended to maritime means, increasing security in the country's oceans in partnership with the National Navy. Air and maritime interdiction against drug trafficking reduced the financial and smuggling flows of illegal groups in Colombia, (although these are also financed by illegal mining). The decisive role of the Air Force in controlling Colombia's airspace contributed to the shift of drug trafficking flows to other countries in the region. For this reason, the Air Force assumed the establishment of agreements and interdiction procedures with countries such as: the United States, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Paraguay, as well as reinforced interdiction in the Caribbean Sea.⁵⁶

Despite joint efforts in the fight against drug trafficking, it cannot be ignored that, according to a 2023 report⁵⁷ published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), global cocaine production has skyrocketed dramatically. Strong growth in supply has been accompanied by a similar increase in demand, and many regions have seen a steady rise in cocaine users over the past decade. The cocaine market remains fairly concentrated in the Americas. The demobilisation of FARC fighters, who until then controlled many of the country's coca-growing regions, opened the way for other local actors or even foreign groups from Mexico and Europe. Colombia continues to dominate trafficking routes to North America, where most of the cocaine is Colombian. However, routes to Europe have evolved. The dominant role of Colombia's ports as a departure

⁵² BARRIOS 2020: 102.

⁵³ BARRIOS 2020: 96.

⁵⁴ TRIANA 2019: 27–75.

⁵⁵ BARRIOS 2020: 102.

⁵⁶ TRIANA 2019: 65.

⁵⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – UNODC 2023: 12.

point appears to be diminishing, and traffickers increasingly transit their product through Central and other South American countries. Cocaine from Bolivia and Peru is increasingly transported via the Southern Cone route through Paraguay and the Paraná–Paraguay waterway. Criminal groups, often from Brazil, use planes to cross the border and then boats across the river to the Atlantic.

New possibilities: From classical security to Human Security and multi-tasking Army

In the Cold War period, at the height of the atomic age, international security was considered from the military agenda of the states. The end of the Cold War marked a time of transformation and change in the international system. The triumph of Western democratic ideas encouraged the rise of liberal values.⁵⁸ Thus, the classic doctrine of national security focused on the protection of the State has gradually given way to Human Security, an expression that considers that the individual should be the object of protection. The 1994, the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in its second chapter, *New Dimensions of Human Security*, incorporated the need to broaden the notion of security into the academic debate and introduced the concept of Human Security. According to the UNDP, Human Security “is not a concern for weapons: it is a concern for human life and dignity [...] expressed in a child who does not die, a disease that does not spread, a job that is not eliminated, an ethnic tension that does not explode into violence, a dissident who is not silenced”.⁵⁹ This approach therefore includes aspects of economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.

The military forces, in the process of transformation towards the Army of the Future 2030,⁶⁰ incorporate principles of the expanded security approach in the *Damascus Doctrine*,⁶¹ without leaving behind the fundamental constitutional principle of ensuring the survival and sovereignty of the national State.⁶² Following the above, the idea of a multi-mission Army becomes important as a multi-purpose Force in charge of diversifying the response to threats not only to national security but also to human beings and communities. Hence the need to institutionalise non-lethal operations and support to civilian authorities whose purpose is people. This in order to save lives, improve the quality of life, protect property (public and private) and support the social recovery of the territory, always safeguarding the rights and guarantees of the civilian population. In other words, it is about guaranteeing humanitarian conditions, human rights, public order and security from broader aspects than the purely military factor.⁶³

⁵⁸ GONZÁLEZ–BETANCOURT 2018: 77.

⁵⁹ United Nations Development Programme – UNDP 1994: 25.

⁶⁰ Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2016.

⁶¹ ROJAS 2017: 95–119.

⁶² GONZÁLEZ–BETANCOURT 2018: 77.

⁶³ GONZÁLEZ–BETANCOURT 2018: 80.

The Policy on Security, Defence and Citizen Coexistence 2022–2026 (based on a human security approach) emphasises that it is necessary to demilitarise relations between civil society and the military in order to avoid excesses in the exercise of force.⁶⁴ In this respect, the actions of the military forces in extrajudicial executions (false positives) committed in the context of the armed conflict by members of the Colombian army who passed off civilians as members of guerrillas in order to show results, have been questioned by organisations such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). In a ceremony convened in April 2022 by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the transitional court that investigates the armed conflict, a group of retired officers acknowledged to the victims that they had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. This was the first time that former officers of the Armed Forces explicitly and in detail admitted to one of the most traumatic operations of the war in Colombia. One that, according to the JEP itself, left at least 6,402 civilians dead. The ghost of false positives returned to the centre of public debate just after an army operation in Putumayo department, in the south of the country, left 11 dead, including three civilians who were initially declared combatants.⁶⁵

The peace agreement reached in 2016 between the government and the FARC makes it possible to produce changes in the Colombian Armed Forces, making them fundamental to generate development and progress in the most remote and inhospitable areas of the country, where other state institutions have not been able to reach.⁶⁶ For example, Apiay is a military unit with an important potential to promote social and economic development in the Colombian Orinoquia, the region called to be the main agricultural pantry of the country. It is an area that generates hydrocarbons and sustainable demographic development.⁶⁷ It also highlights the articulation of the Colombian Air Force with the National System of Science, Technology and Innovation – *Colciencias* in the implementation of an open innovation model. This initiative seeks to reduce weaknesses and increase capacities, applying the concept of intelligent networks. The idea is to strengthen the articulation in high performance teams of the entities of the triad University–Enterprise–State, with the generation of new knowledge and obtaining R + D + I products with value creation, which could contribute directly to the construction of the national economic and social fabric.⁶⁸

On the other hand, the military participates in regional and international scenarios by offering training to foreign security forces to confront transnational crime (e.g. drug and arms trafficking). The effort to internationalise the Colombian military's expertise and to create links with the international community has also reached multilateral organisations.⁶⁹ In December 2016, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accepted Colombia's request to establish a bilateral dialogue to sign a cooperation agreement for the exchange

⁶⁴ Ministry of National Defence – Mindefensa 2023: 13.

⁶⁵ PARDO 2022.

⁶⁶ DURÁN 2019: 248.

⁶⁷ DURÁN 2019: 249.

⁶⁸ PARADA 2019: 258.

⁶⁹ RIASCOS 2019: 275.

of information and the fight against organised crime.⁷⁰ Likewise, it opens the possibility for the Military Forces to participate in Peace Operations abroad.⁷¹

Conclusions and discussion

In this paper the transformations in the field of security that Colombia experienced have been analysed, especially in the 1990s and in the first years of the new century. Emphasis has been placed on the evolution of the Air Force as a military organisation to face the different threats and violence suffered by three generations of Colombians. One of the aspects addressed is the role played by this military entity in the culmination of the internal armed conflict, especially from the nineties of the last century to the present. In this sense, it was emphasised that the Armed Forces realised that the tactical and strategic advantage of air power could be key to produce an asymmetry that would allow them to win battles.

In fact, air power was configured as a military tool for the State in its struggle to recover the legitimate monopoly of violence and change the balance of the internal conflict, helping the military defeat of the FARC. This factor prompted a political settlement in the Havana negotiations (2012–2016), avoiding another frustration like that of the Distension Zones during the Pastrana Administration. All this was possible thanks to doctrinal changes that boosted a more effective planning and execution of operations, supported by a more offensive and mobile concept; as well as by the improvement of intelligence, technology, communications and better command and control structures. Another area in which the Air Force has been important is the fight against drug trafficking. To this end, the integration of different units not only within the Colombian Air Force but also within the country and involving the air forces of other countries has been key factors.

Three administrations have integrated civilian and military efforts to address security issues. However, future short- and medium-term strategies should place more emphasis on social and economic development. While military efforts are essential to provide the security environment and support the rule of law and governance, current challenges involving aspects of security that go beyond the military require innovation in other non-arms domains to sustain long-term social projects. In this sense, the Colombian Armed Forces have the multiple challenges of combating organised crime while supporting isolated communities. In other words, it is called upon to protect natural resources, build infrastructure, decontaminate territories from landmines, and provide humanitarian support in case of natural disasters. This call shows the importance of the doctrinal articulation of international approaches, such as Human Security, the protection of human rights and freedoms in all areas of security.

⁷⁰ OTAN 2021.

⁷¹ SAUMETH 2016.

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