



Militarization of the U.S. Drug Control Program

By Peter Zirnite

At a time when fledgling civilian governments in Latin America are struggling to keep security forces in check, the U.S. has enlisted the region's militaries as its pivotal partners in international drug control. This militarization, which begins at the U.S.-Mexico border, is undermining recent trends toward greater democratization and respect for human rights, while doing little to stanch the flow of drugs into the United States.

Washington's militarization of its anti-drug efforts is the product of a U.S. drug-control strategy that historically has emphasized reducing the supply of illegal narcotics rather than addressing the demand for drugs. In 1971, three years after the first declared "war on drugs," President Richard Nixon took a crucial step toward militarization by proclaiming drug trafficking a national security threat.

"Protecting the national security" has remained the rallying cry for providing more money and firepower to wage the war on drugs. Since the 1970s, U.S. spending on the drug war has risen from less than \$1 billion to more than \$16 billion annually.

In the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan raised the curtain on a rapid expansion of U.S. anti-drug efforts that continues unabated today. Reagan justified the expansion, in part, by developing the narco-guerrilla theory, which bolstered the national security rationale by positing ties between the Colombian cartels and Cuba, leftist guerrillas in Colombia, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

The purported guerrilla-drug link has also been used to legitimize the approach the Pentagon has taken in carrying out its anti-drug mission in Latin America, the source of

all cocaine and an increasingly large amount of the heroin that enters the United States. Shifting the Pentagon's posture in the region from the cold war to the drug war was easy because the new enemy included many old foes, allowing U.S. military personnel to

employ the same tactics that they had used in fighting communism.

The National Defense Authorization Act of 1989 designated the Pentagon as the "single lead agency" for the detection and monitoring of illicit drug shipments into the United States. Soon after, President George Bush announced his Andean Initiative, a \$2.2 billion, five-year plan to stop the cocaine trade at its source. Although U.S. military personnel had been involved in training, equipping, and transporting foreign anti-narcotics personnel since the early 1980s, the Andean strategy opened the door to a dramatic expansion of this role and to a significant infusion of U.S. assistance to police and military forces in the region.

The Andean Initiative placed the spotlight on Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Yet the vast majority of the Pentagon's international drug spending still went to detection and monitoring operations in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico transit zones, the cost of which, according to a September 1993 General Accounting Office report, eventually swelled "out of proportion to the benefits it provided."

In late 1993, President Clinton shifted the emphasis of military operations, at least in terms of energy, if not spending, from interdicting cocaine as it moved through the transit zones into the U.S. to dismantling the so-called "air bridge" that connects coca growers and coca paste manufacturers in Peru and Bolivia with Colombian refiners and distributors. As a result, drug traffickers quickly abandoned air routes in favor of the region's labyrinth of waterways. The Pentagon responded by supporting interdiction operations that target the waterways in both source countries and neighboring nations.

Today, the vast majority of Washington's international anti-narcotics spending goes to Latin America and the Caribbean, where thousands of U.S. troops are annually deployed in support of the drug war, operating ground-based radar, flying monitoring aircraft, providing operation and intelligence support, and training host-nation security forces. Despite this militarization and the massive funding for Washington's drug war, illegal drugs still flood the United States. In fact, illegal drugs are more readily available now, at a higher purity and lower cost, than they were when the drug war was launched.

Key Points

- The U.S. has enlisted Latin America's militaries as its pivotal partners in international drug control.
- Protecting national security is used as the rationale behind the militarization of U.S. counternarcotics efforts—a justification that is strengthened by linking guerrilla movements to drug trafficking.
- Militarization and increased funding for the war on drugs has failed to stem the flow of narcotics into the United States.

Washington's ambitious new strategy to "attack narcotics trafficking in Colombia on all fronts" underscores the fundamental problem with the U.S. approach to international drug control. The plan is premised on the Pentagon forging closer ties to Colombia's military with the aim of building what Gen. Charles E. Wilhelm, commander of U.S. military forces in Latin America and the Caribbean, describes as "marriage for life."

U.S. policymakers apparently believe that local militaries are their most capable and reliable allies in the war on drugs. Throughout Latin America, the resources and training that Washington provides to local armed forces in order to support their new role in domestic drug control operations—often in circumvention of congressional restrictions and oversight—are eroding the efforts of civilian-elected governments to consolidate their power.

Although counternarcotics operations are a law enforcement function reserved in most democracies for civilian police, the U.S. prefers to use military forces. When Washington does recruit police, it provides them with heavy arms and with training in combat tactics that are inappropriate for the role that police should play in a civilian society, thereby continuing to fuel human rights abuses. During the 1970s, Congress halted police aid programs because of widespread human rights abuses by U.S.-trained police in Latin America, but in the 1980s these programs resumed in Central America and have since spread to many other countries.

The militarization of counternarcotics efforts in Latin America not only undermines efforts to promote human rights and democracy, it also threatens regional security. In Colombia, where the line between fighting drug trafficking and combating insurgents is blurred, Washington risks becoming mired in the hemisphere's longest-running guerrilla war, possibly widening that conflict into neighboring countries. Citing the threat posed by Colombia's guerrillas, who earn much of their income by protecting coca and poppy fields and clandestine drug laboratories, the Pentagon has already expanded its operations in Ecuador and Venezuela.

By providing advanced military training and equipment to both Ecuador and Peru, the U.S. may also hamper efforts to resolve a longstanding border dispute between the two countries. In July 1998, the *Washington Post* reported that at the closing ceremony of a joint anti-drug operation conducted by U.S. special forces, Ecuador's military vowed to "never cede one millimeter of territory to the Peruvians."

In 1997, about 56,000 U.S. troops were deployed in Latin America, according to a July 1998 report by the Latin American Working Group (LAWG). Although many of these troops were involved in humanitarian projects, counternarcotics is the rationale for most U.S. troop deployments and for grant assistance to the region's militaries and police, which this year is expected to total more than \$250 million.

Assistance to Latin American security forces stems from a tangled web of training and aid programs administered by a variety of government agencies,

making it difficult to ascertain the exact extent and nature of U.S. anti-drug assistance and stymieing efforts to determine whether Washington is complying with congressional oversight and human rights requirements.

The perils posed by the lack of adequate controls can be seen in Mexico, where President Ernesto Zedillo agreed to expand the military's counternarcotics role following an October 1995 visit from the U.S. Secretary of State. Despite restrictions limiting their use to anti-drug work, U.S.-supplied helicopters were used to ferry troops to quell the rebellion in Chiapas. Such dangers are likely to be heightened regionwide by a disturbing trend—an increasing amount of U.S. aid is being provided under Pentagon programs that are exempt from civilian oversight and human rights legislation.

Among the overseas training programs not subject to the restrictions and oversight that apply to other U.S. military operations are special operations forces Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises, which involve Army Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and other special operations forces. The U.S. Southern Command plans to conduct nearly 200 of these specialized training exercises this year, with troops being deployed to all 19 Latin American countries and nine in the Caribbean, according to the *Washington Post*. More than 60% of these deployments will have a counternarcotics component.

Even when programs are covered by restrictions, U.S. military personnel are loath to enforce them. In 1997, the White House responded to congressional pressure by limiting assistance to Colombia's armed forces, which have the most egregious human rights record in the hemisphere. Units receiving U.S. training are supposed to be vetted to ensure that they include no one accused of human rights violations, but screening, when it occurs, is cursory.

As a result of both the lack of oversight and restrictions on some aid programs and of ineffective implementation of regulations when they do exist, U.S. troops work side by side with accused human rights violators throughout the region, not just in Colombia. As Colombian sociologist Ricardo Vargas Meza, who has warned about the growing risk of "a dirty war" in his country, notes, "Washington lights one candle for God and another one for the devil."

Human rights violators are not the only devil Washington is making a pact with. Ironically, the U.S. decision to engage armed forces as its principal allies in the drug war has meant that the Pentagon is now providing counternarcotics assistance to militaries implicated in drug-related corruption, including those in Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, and Mexico.

Key Problems

- Militarization of counternarcotics efforts in Latin America undermines recent trends toward democratization and greater respect for human rights while threatening regional security.
 - Resources and training provided to the region's armed forces to support their new role in domestic drug control operations often circumvent congressional oversight and human rights restrictions.
 - U.S. military personnel work side by side with armed forces implicated in human rights violations and drug trafficking.
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Even as the Department of Defense plans further expansion of its counternarcotics operations in Latin America, many within its ranks are reluctant recruits in these efforts and are vocal about their reticence. These critics, like their civilian counterparts, question the underlying rationale for the mission, its effectiveness, and its impact on the region's democratic institutions. They also question the strategies and tactics being used to carry out the mission, arguing that they work at cross-purposes with the

America—even though McCaffrey said publicly that the funds weren't needed.

Washington lawmakers are moving in the wrong direction. The United States must act to reduce (not merely redefine) the role of militaries within societies. Currently, the U.S. is providing the training, resources, and doctrinal rationale for armed forces to take on new tasks (building roads and schools, offering health services, protecting the environment, controlling drugs) rather than acting to limit their role to the defense of national borders. Given the problems and risks associated with Washington's militarization of its anti-narcotics programs in Latin America, the U.S. government should cease financial and political support for Latin American military involvement in drug control operations.

But in the current political atmosphere in Washington, where drug control policy is fueled by the fear of being labeled "soft" on drugs, it is unlikely that either the White House or Congress will act to reduce the counternarcotics roles played by U.S. and Latin American militaries, despite their ineffectiveness in combating drug trafficking. At a minimum, Washington needs to exercise greater control over the programs under which it provides training, equipment, and financial assistance to Latin American forces for anti-drug operations.

A new approach should begin by revamping the special operations forces training programs, an increasingly popular method of providing counternarcotics assistance. When and how to train Latin American forces under the JCET must be decided at the highest levels of the Pentagon and State Department, not by Southcom officials eager to justify their annual appropriations.

The most effective change, and one that LAWG attempts to initiate with its study, would be to require the administration to provide Congress with a unified annual report that contains information about all training activities with Latin American security forces, whether for counternarcotics or other purposes and regardless of what laws authorize them or the agencies that administer them. This report would greatly enhance the ability of Congress to exercise its oversight function. It would also provide the information needed to stimulate a long-overdue public debate that could encompass overall U.S. drug control policy and its failed supply-side focus, which fosters militarization.

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Key Recommendations

- The Clinton administration must develop a broad, clearly defined strategy for strengthening civilian governments and reducing the role of the armed forces in Latin America.
- Greater control needs to be exercised over the programs under which training, equipment, and financial assistance is provided to the region's forces for anti-drug operations.
- Congress should be provided an annual report containing information about all training activities, regardless of what laws authorize them or agencies administer them.

according to drug policy coordinator Brian Sheridan, has been asked to address a "terrible social problem" with a "series of lousy policy options"—an untenable situation that has many military planners "looking for the exit doors on this issue."

That militarization of anti-drug efforts continues apace in the face of such criticism underscores a critical point: the Clinton administration lacks a broad, clearly defined strategy for strengthening civilian governments and reducing the role of the armed forces in the region. Indeed, the opposite seems to be

happening. The School of the Americas, which trains Latin American military officers, has rapidly altered its curriculum: Between 1989 and 1997, the number of counternarcotics courses jumped from zero to ninety.

Similarly, the U.S. Southern Command (Southcom), searching for a new *raison d'être*, was quick to fill the post-cold war policy void, enlisting Latin American militaries as part of its counternarcotics strategy. Retired General Barry McCaffrey, current head of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, stepped down as Southcom commander to become the U.S. drug czar, bringing many of his military protégés with him. Since his March 1996 appointment, McCaffrey has routinely eschewed use of the war metaphor in describing U.S. drug control efforts, except for when he speaks about Latin America, where he finds it "pretty useful."

In September 1998, Congressional zeal for the drug war led to passage of an additional \$2.3 billion for interdiction, including helicopters and hardware for Latin American security forces and \$300 million for construction of a new U.S. military base in Latin

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Lindesmith Center

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Office of National Drug Control Policy

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov>

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