



THE STRENGTHENING OF THE COLOMBIAN AIR FORCE: AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY ON THE ROAD TO NEGOTIATION¹

EL FORTALECIMIENTO DE LA FUERZA AÉREA COLOMBIANA: UNA EFECTIVA ESTRATEGIA HACIA LA NEGOCIACIÓN²

O FORTALECIMENTO DA FORÇA AÉREA COLOMBIANA: UMA ESTRATÉGIA EFICAZ FACE À NEGOCIAÇÃO³

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Abstract: This article discusses how the strengthening of the Colombian Air Force since the beginning of the new millennium, resulted in the military weakening of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). These circumstances, along with the overall strengthening of the national security forces allowed to develop the proper conditions to initiate a set of peace talks between the most remarkable insurgent organization and the Colombian State, in very different conditions from previous experiences.

Key Words: Air Force; Asymmetrical Warfare; Counterinsurgency; Internal Conflict; Plan Colombia.

Resumen: el presente artículo analiza cómo el fortalecimiento de la Fuerza Aérea colombiana a partir del inicio del nuevo milenio, permitió proporcionar importantes golpes militares a las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC-EP), llevando a esta organización si bien no a una derrota militar, si a un detrimento en sus capacidades operativas. Estas circunstancias de fortaleza en el terreno de batalla, permitieron que el Estado colombiano pudiera abordar un proceso de negociación y diálogo con esta debilitada organización subversiva, muy diferente a las desarrolladas en el pasado.

Palabras clave: conflicto interno; contra insurgencia; Fuerza Aérea; guerra asimétrica; Plan Colombia.

Resumo: este artigo analisa como o fortalecimento da Força Aérea Colombiana desde o início do novo milênio permitiu fornecer golpes militares significativos contra as Forças Armadas Revolucionárias da Colômbia (FARC-EP). Se bem não levou esta organização a uma derrota militar, se conseguiu um enfraquecimento nas suas capacidades operacionais. Estas circunstâncias de força no campo de batalha, permitiram que o governo colombiano pudesse enfrentar um processo de negociação e diálogo com a organização subversiva enfraquecida, diferente daqueles desenvolvidos no passado.

Palavras-chave: conflito interno; contra insurgência; Força Aérea; guerra assimétrica; Plano Colômbia.



Introduction

The successful implementation of air power in a war scenario is a relatively recent phenomenon in modern history. According to Mueller (2010), air power became an important element of military warfare as soon as civil aviation itself existed, but with the latter occurrence of World War I and World War II, military applications for airplanes and airships quickly multiplied.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Italian General Giulio Douhet (1921), predicted that aeronautics would open up a new field of action: a field situated above ground. He also anticipated how the speed and free reign of airplanes as instruments of reconnaissance would later be used to attack enemies on and behind their own lines. Two decades after the end of the First World War, quick implementations of aeronautics into military affairs vastly altered traditional warfare, which made battlefields of these new wars above ground apparent. Additionally, it highlighted air superiority as an extraordinary tool of military force to achieve victory.

During the last decades, air supremacy has faced challenges posed by new forms of threats which deviated from the conventional inter-state war observed during the last century. These threats include states using asymmetrical tactics and non-state actors conforming transnational terrorism organizations, creating a wide range of security challenges that air supremacy must counter through adaptation and innovation.

In Colombia a long armed conflict conditioned by a context of political violence, guerrilla warfare and hard geographical conditions of the battlefield, provided an special opportunity to demonstrate how the successful strengthening of armed forces, specially, the Colombian Air Force, could provide an strategic advantage in order to deteriorate the operational capabilities of a non-state actor, like FARC, and ultimately crating the necessary conditions to stablish peace talks between the national government and the most representative insurgency within the Colombian conflict.

Strengthening Airpower in an Asymmetrical Conflict Against FARC

Although defining air power is not the objective of this paper, early development of aviation and air forces should be seen as a concept worth embracing. This includes a wide range of elements upon which the air forces are directly or indirectly dependent on. Therefore, this paper provides some definitions of air power in order to explain the concept itself, its main characteristics, strategic advantages, and challenges.

According to military standards in the United States, air superiority is defined in the Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, as that degree of dominance in the air battle of one force over another which permits the conduct of operations by the former and its related land, sea, and air forces at a given time and place without prohibitive interference by the opposing force (Cate, 2003).

Accordingly, Lombo (2002) explains how EURAC, a forum comprising 17 air chiefs of European nations, defines air power as the ability to project military force in air or space by or from a platform or missile operating from above the surface of the earth. Both definitions reveal special characteristics of air power dominance of the third dimension and refer to air operations and military force in an offensive or defensive form through any aircraft, such as a helicopter or an unmanned air vehicle.

The Royal Air Force (2009) explains how air power explores the third dimension with special characteristics such as speed, reach, and height, which allows for generally greater reach than naval vessels or land vehicles. Speed permits rapid projection of military power and aids in the quick completion of missions, which reduces exposure to hostile fire and increases survivability. Reach enables distant or isolated targets to be attacked and potential restrictions to be circumvented, while height allows airmen to observe and dominate activities on the surface of the globe and above the sea. This strategy enables direct fire to be used against an adversary's forces.

These same characteristics are reaffirmed by Lombo (2002), explaining how height allows air power to observe with remarkable levels of precision and how it facilitates the ability to efficiently see what is happening in the surface in real time operations. He continues describing speed as a powerful source for completing missions as quickly as possible, which allows the reuse of resources several times within a short time frame. Lastly, Lombo mentions how reach is utilized in over-flights of entire oceans in just a few hours, overcoming natural barriers in any weather conditions.

Despite the remarkable characteristics described above, during most part of the internal conflict Colombia was not able to implement a counterinsurgency strategy based on the modernization of its Air Force. Circumstances like a weak economy or a significantly low military budget during most part of the 20th century, were counterproductive in order to significantly upgrade or replace equipment and to increment the size of manpower. However these circumstances changed in the last fifteen years and allowed

the government to implement a new set of tools to fight an insurgency who unlike the state, experimented over those years a remarkable grow in their finance and military capabilities due to their involvement in narcotics.

This circumstance can be clearly evidenced if we take in consideration how by 1982, FARC only counted with 2,000 combatants scattered in 15 fronts. After the appearance of the Medellín Cartel and other similar organizations, and the placement of their illegal crops and laboratories in territories controlled by the armed group, FARC's involvement with narcotics maximized its profits. Therefore the military strengthening of the guerrilla was based in the economic support provided by their alliance with drug cartels and afterward by its positioning as a main producer and distributor of cocaine itself.

FARC developed a strategic plan to topple the government and to gain national political power by revolutionary means, inspired by successful insurgent campaigns in several countries in latinamerica. Such strategy was supposed to be executed through a military and territorial expansion which would allow them to create 60 fronts with more than 18,000 armed men, obtaining 56 million dollars as economic support and acquiring armament and communication devices.

The second stage, which was to be executed between 1992 and 1994, the guerrilla had a goal of creating 80 fronts with 32,000 men and obtaining 200 million dollars. Finally, the third stage, which would be executed between 1994 and 1996, would aim their operations in the so called Centro de Despliegue Estratégico, in Colombia's eastern mountain range, which would harbor 16,000 of the 32,000 men (Verdad Abierta, 2013).

This strategic plan was based on the historical territorial fragmentation of Colombia due to its geography, and the difficulty of the Colombian armed forces to mobilize great amounts of troops over the territory, or providing a considerable threat to the insurgency with the airpower which was available at the time. This circumstance was evident during the late nineties when in November 1st, 1998 approximately a thousand guerrilla fighters attacked the police base in Mitu, the capital city of the Vaupes Department. A few hours later, the town had fallen into the hands of FARC. The capital has been considered a high valued target of the armed group due to its importance and geographic location and until today it is considered as one of the group's greatest military victories.

The operation Vuelo de Angel, was executed with the objective of regaining control over the capital of Vaupes,

became a strategic advancement of the Colombian armed forces and proved how strategical airpower was in order to combat guerrillas and to increase the presence of the military capacities of the State, eve in the most remote corners of its territory. The taking of Mitu would be considered a step forward in the plan implemented by the guerrilla for the taking of power, and would allow them to step out of guerrilla fighting tactics to tactics based on territorial positions. The Air Force would be essential to counter the actions perpetrated by FARC, mainly from a defensive perspective at first, to be later deployed in an offensive way, based on the strategic advantages provide by airpower.

The fragmentation of the Colombian territory and the absence of institutions made of the fall and retaking of Mitu one of the biggest challenges in the counter insurgency fight to the date. The first drawback was the destruction of the Mitu landing strip by the guerrilla, making impossible the landing of support aircraft. Second, the helicopters owned by the Air Force didn't count with the sufficient flight autonomy to make it to Mitu and get back to San Jose del Guaviare, because the radius of operations of 200 miles was surpassed by 160 (Chaljub, 2014).

In November 2nd, 1998 the armed forces counter offensive began with UH-60 helicopters flying over the area, shooting at military targets, in order to provide support and time for the aircrafts that would arrive in the area carrying near 250 soldiers. The government of Brazil authorized the Colombian armed forces the use of the Queri military base for a period of 48 hours, in order to begin the transfer of troops that would be in charge of taking back the territory under attack. In the morning of November 3rd, FARC began drawing back their forces while receiving deadly bombing which ultimately killed approximately 80 combatants of FARC's 37th front.

This successful military precedent and eventually the later implementation of Plan Colombia as a political and military strategy promoted by the United States Government, first in the war on drugs and afterwards in the war on terrorism, played a vital role in the strengthening of the Colombian armed forces and their capacities, especially those related with airpower, and the weakening of the insurgency, its military structure and economic support.

The foreign policy of the United States aimed to provide support to the Colombian government in the defense and strengthening its democratic institutions, promoting respect for human rights and rule of law, intensifying anti-narcotics efforts, promoting socioeconomic development and resolving humanitarian necessities (Noriega, 2004). The military aid obtained was certainly significant in the



counterinsurgency strategy developed over the first decade of the new millennium. The defense budget expenses in the region during these years increased significantly, mainly financed by the economic growth. In 2007, the GDP percentage of military expenses in the region was as follows; Brazil, 1.5%, in comparison to 4% of the USA, in Chile 3.4%, in Argentina 0.8% and Venezuela a military expense of 1.3%. The defense budget in Colombian and Ecuador were significantly high, 11% and 9% respectively (Nolte and Flandes, 2010).

Besides Plan Colombia, the Uribe administration formulated the Plan Patriota, which became the main stage of implementation of the Seguridad Democrática policy, by being a major offensive of the Colombian armed forces, supported logistically, strategically and operationally by the United States. The objective of the Patriot Plan was to recover the territory considered for years as a bastion of FARC in the southern part of the country, weakening them there with the aim of ending the war. The first phase began between November 2003 and January 2004 with the organization of the Task Force Omega. The second phase was implemented from 2006 onwards and with the objective of capturing the main guerrilla leaders in 160,600 square kilometers of jungle. It is calculated that Plan Patriota mobilized around 18,000 soldiers (Rojas, 2006).

The new tools in the counterinsurgency strategy started to provide some significant strikes against FARC. The first significant blow that the armed forces had against FARC was a combined operation aimed to eliminate, Raul Reyes, considered as a high value target due to his role in the guerrilla organization. This operation took place on March 1st 2008 and went by the name of Operacion Fenix. Five aircraft A-29B Super Tucano flew towards the objective. At the same time, three A37 subsonic aircraft were deployed to support the mission. The aircraft dropped ten GBU 12 Paveway bombs, weighing 500 pounds each, over the camp where the revolutionary leader was settled. The bombs left ten craters of 2.4 meters deep and 1.8 meters in diameter each. Moments after the first offensive, the armed group responded. This response was taken care of by the second offensive. Afterwards twenty Special Forces soldiers, eight navy specialist and eighteen jungle command members of the police descended from two Black Hawk helicopters. At the end of the mission, twenty five lifeless bodies were identified, among them Raul Reyes and four Mexican students that had arrived at the camp days earlier (Cardona, 2013).

The next remarkable hit to FARC took place on September 22, 2010, during Operacion Sodoma, which involved F4U and Super Tucano aircraft, which were supported by 27

helicopters from the air force and the army aviation unit. After a heavy bombing, Jorge Briceño Suarez, alias Mono Jojoy, a top leader of the guerrilla organization was killed. Accordingly, Operacion Odiseo, had Alfonso Cano, leader of FARC as an objective, and took place after a long intelligence job. This started in the towns of Pradera and Florida, Valle del Cauca, after penetrating the structures that guarded his movements.

The Strengthening of the Colombian armed forces was determinant in order to kill or captured a significant number of FARC leaders in a short span of time, among those, Martin Caballero, El Negro Acacio, Martin Sombra, Raúl Reyes, Iván Ríos, el Mono Jojoy y Alfonso Cano (Cardona, 2013). These circumstances marked a deterioration in FARC military capabilities which ultimately developed the proper conditions to initiate peace negotiations, in order to abandon their armed struggle to political power and the development of social and political reforms in order to allow their participation democratic and non-violent political processes.

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