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**Saving Afghanistan from Insurgency and a Narco-Economy: Can Lessons Learned in  
Colombia Chart a Course for a Fledgling State?**

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## **Abstract**

The government of Afghanistan (GOA) is struggling to rebuild a country scarred by years of instability and war. They are struggling to maintain a viable state while fighting the influence of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, widespread corruption, and the pervasive trafficking of opium. The nation of Colombia provides a historical precedent similar to the challenges faced by Afghanistan. Colombia has been fighting a left-wing insurgency and violent narco-traffickers for many years. In 1999, Colombia was on the brink of becoming a failed state. Recognizing the dire straits their country was in, the Government instituted Plan Colombia as a means to promote peace and democracy, reduce violence, combat the flow of drugs, and improve the lives of all Colombians. This paper will analyze the pillars of Plan Colombia and compare them to the current strategy in Afghanistan. It will also address whether the lessons are applicable to Afghanistan despite the many differences between the two countries. Finally, the paper will draw conclusions and provide recommendations to implement these lessons into the fight against the insurgency and narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan.

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## Introduction

The nascent government of Afghanistan (GOA) is fighting an uphill battle as it strives to rebuild a country scarred by years of instability, war, economic deprivation and a sustained hopelessness of its people. The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led military efforts against both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (AQ) are critically important to the rebirth of Afghanistan as a free and democratic nation. However, Islamic extremists are not the sole enemy challenging the rise of this nation.

Another adversary threatens the long-term stability of Afghanistan. *Papaver somniferum*, the poppy plant (the key ingredient in opium and heroin), has been cultivated in Afghanistan for centuries. In 1979, after the Soviet Union invaded and decimated Afghanistan, the poppy plant became a critical element to the livelihood of many Afghans. An opium based narco-economy has dominated Afghanistan ever since.<sup>1</sup> The pervasive cultivation of poppy, along with the production and distribution of its opiate products serve as the lifeblood of the Afghan economy.

This narco-economy is a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing that preys on the poor and lines the pockets of the wealthy and corrupt in the country. It finances terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan, whose goals include defeating and expelling U.S. and coalition forces, destabilizing the pro-western government of Hamid Karzai, and re-establishing the Taliban-led, Wahibist-based government of old.<sup>2</sup>

An effective U.S. counter-narcotics (CN) effort within the overarching military construct is critical to achieving a free, democratic and stable Afghanistan. Success is more likely attainable if the U.S. and its partners place greater emphasis on the CN fight as part of the broader counter-terrorism (CT) and counter-insurgency (COIN) effort. Adjusting the U.S. strategic objectives in the region to better address the opium problem will provide the

operational commander the impetus to adjust the military objectives in the region as well. Until the narco-economy is addressed as a sub-component of “enemy forces” in Afghanistan, it will be difficult to achieve and maintain long-term stability in the region.

The U.S. should closely examine and apply in Afghanistan, lessons learned from the U.S. participation in Plan Colombia. Implementing these lessons into current U.S. policy will assist in defeating the Taliban / AQ, reduce the Country’s reliance on a narco-economy, and ultimately keep the Afghan Government from imploding. Though not the cure-all remedy for defeating our enemies in Afghanistan or eliminating the pervasive opium industry, there is much to be gained from the U.S. experience in Colombia.

There are vast disparities between the countries of Colombia and Afghanistan across their histories, economies, populace and governments. There are also, however, some parallels between them as both countries grapple with violent insurgencies funded by international narcotics trafficking profits.

The Government of Colombia (GOC) has been fighting to maintain a viable state since the mid-1960s. During the course of this struggle, they learned valuable lessons in COIN and CN operations. The lessons learned more recently during the implementation of Plan Colombia from 1999-2005 applied to the current crisis in Afghanistan may set the conditions for the GOA to prevail.

## **Background**

### **Colombia**

Colombia has been entrenched in a civil war for over 40 years with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), both of which are left-wing, Marxist-based ideological groups.<sup>3</sup> The FARC and ELN took control of the

country's prolific international cocaine trafficking business after the GOC toppled the Medellin and Cali Cartels, the largest of the Colombian drug trafficking organizations, in the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Both groups quickly lost sight of their original ideological base that sought to bridge the economic gap between all Colombians, which consisted of the very poor (the majority), and the wealthy (the minority). The FARC and ELN transformed into multi-million dollar drug trafficking organizations shrouded under the auspices of left-wing insurgencies. The profits of the drug trade finance these insurgencies responsible for terrorizing the citizens of Colombia through intimidation, murder and kidnapping.<sup>5</sup>

The period from 1990-2000 was an especially difficult for Colombia. "Colombia's problems with insurgency, deteriorating economic conditions, corruption in government, and paramilitary violence against civilians reached crisis proportions toward the end of the decade."<sup>6</sup> Recognizing his nation was in crisis and on the verge of collapse; Colombian President Andres Pastrana developed an aggressive, expensive, and multi-faceted, six-year plan referred to as Plan Colombia to address the vast challenges facing his country.

President Pastrana introduced Plan Colombia in October 1999. "The Government of Colombia developed Plan Colombia as an integrated strategy to meet the most pressing challenges confronting Colombia -- promoting the peace process, combating the narcotics industry, reviving the Colombian economy, and strengthening the democratic pillars of Colombian Society."<sup>7</sup>

Pastrana's Plan Colombia relied heavily on international support, primarily in the form of financial assistance. The USG was eager to support this endeavor since 90 percent of the cocaine imported into the U.S. originates in Colombia.<sup>8</sup> "The USG committed to long-term support of Plan Colombia and has provided billions of dollars in financial assistance, military training and support, as well as extensive military equipment sales since 1999."<sup>9</sup>

## Afghanistan

Six years after the fall of the Taliban regime, vis-à-vis the U.S. invasion and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Afghanistan remains a nation in crisis. The country lacks natural resources, and has limited productivity capability. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Most Afghans live on less than a dollar a day, and the country's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was \$377 in 2007.<sup>10</sup>

Approximately 15% of the Afghan population earns their living by participating at some level in the cultivation, production or distribution of illicit narcotics derived from the poppy.<sup>11</sup> At least half of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) comes from the drug trade, and Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai has noted that the greatest challenge to the security of his country is the opium economy.<sup>12, 13</sup> The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the United Nations estimates that Afghanistan produces more than 90 percent of the world's heroin supply.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to fighting the Taliban and AQ, the United States and NATO are struggling to support the Afghan Government as it rebuilds itself and the country's infrastructure. The U.S. stated national strategic objective in Afghanistan is to "defeat the terrorists, and establish a stable, moderate, and democratic state that respects the rights of its citizens, governs its territory effectively, and is a reliable ally in the War on Terror."<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Central Command's (USCENTCOM) theater strategic objective supports the national objective with a focus on defeating the Taliban and any other aligned insurgent forces, including remnants of AQ. Current Defense Department directives state that U.S. military forces in Afghanistan "will not directly target drug production facilities or pursue drug traffickers as a distinct component of ongoing U.S. CN initiatives."<sup>16</sup> Historically, at the operational and tactical levels of warfighting in Afghanistan, commanders focused on the military objectives of

defeating the Taliban / AQ and had little interest in pursuing those involved in the cultivation or trafficking of illicit drugs. As a matter of policy, if U.S. forces come across laboratories in the course of military operations, they will destroy them.<sup>17</sup> This concept is not aggressive enough or conducive to an effective CN strategy, nor will it result in a substantial decrease in opium output. Until the elements of an effective CN strategy are injected into our military objectives, it will be impossible to achieve the National desired end state of a free and democratic Afghanistan.

In the last several years, the USG recognized the need to address the significant impact of the opium economy on efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Subsequently, the USG developed a CN strategy for Afghanistan. This strategy focuses on helping the GOA disrupt their opium-based economy and strengthen the central government's control over the country.<sup>18</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State, as part of the overarching CN plan for Afghanistan, the USG will provide assistance in these five pillars within the Afghan National Drug Control Policy: 1) Public Information, 2) Alternative Development, 3) Elimination / Eradication, 4) Interdiction, 5) Law Enforcement / Justice Reform.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, the construct of the CN strategy above is similar to Plan Colombia.

### **Analysis of Plan Colombia**

According to the U.S. Department of State, the five components of U.S. assistance and support to Plan Colombia are: 1) Support for Human Rights and Justice Reform, 2) Expansion of Counter-Narcotics Operations into Southern Colombia, 3) Alternative Economic Development, 4) Increased Interdiction, 5) Assistance for the Colombian National Police (CNP).<sup>20</sup> There are elements and lessons from these pillars that are applicable to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

This analysis will focus on only three of the five components of Plan Colombia and their applicability to the U.S. CN efforts in Afghanistan. Though not totally irrelevant to this discussion, this paper will not delve into the components of Human Rights and Justice Reform nor Expansion of Operations into Southern Colombia. There is limited correlation between Colombia and Afghanistan when addressing the Human Rights pillar from Plan Colombia. Comparing the pillar of Justice Reform between Colombia and Afghanistan is not germane to this analysis either due to the wide disparity between the two countries' judicial systems. To do so would be like comparing the workload of a mechanic changing the oil in a car versus performing a complete engine overhaul. Prior to introducing Plan Colombia there was a judicial system in place in the country, though far from perfect. On the other hand, the GOA is standing up an entire judicial system from the ground up.

### **Alternative Economic Development**

The first component of Plan Colombia relevant to Afghanistan is the pillar of Alternative Economic Development. The original construct of U.S. support to Plan Colombia provided “\$81 million to support alternative economic development programs in Colombia to assist rural farmers who grow coca and opium poppies make the transition to legal economic activity as interdiction and eradication make narcotics farming less profitable”<sup>21</sup> Methods of alternative economic development included convincing farmers (campesinos) to plant legal alternatives to coca and poppy by providing seed and fertilizer, and building roads to ease the burden of transporting crops to market. In practice, this concept proved extremely difficult and of limited value in reducing the amount of cocaine and heroin streaming from Colombia. Efforts to convince campesinos to plant alternate crops have been ineffective, but not due to a lack of will or effort on the part of the GOC.

Basic economics is the primary reason for the failure of crop substitution as a means of Alternative Economic Development in Colombia. For the country's impoverished campesinos, the cultivation of poppy and coca is simply more profitable. First, there is no legal crop that can provide even close to the income that coca or poppy provides. Farmers can make upwards of ten times more income by growing illegal crops.<sup>22</sup> Second, coca and poppy are extremely hardy plants that can be grown in remote regions of Colombia with poor soil – places in which alternate crops are not economically feasible.<sup>23</sup> Drug crops also yield better returns than many legal alternatives. For example, after planting, a coca plant can be harvested in 18 months and provide harvests for up to 25 years. Some alternative crops take 5-6 years to reap a first harvest and subsequently come into season only once per year, whereas, coca can be harvested up to six times per year.<sup>24</sup> Third, the ease of moving crops to market favors coca and poppy. Buyers of illicit crops come to the farmer for the goods, whereas, alternate legal crops require farmers to move the product to market prior to it spoiling thus incurring greater cost and risk.<sup>25</sup>

### **Interdiction and Eradication**

The second component of Plan Colombia with applicability to the challenges faced in Afghanistan is the pillar of Interdiction and Eradication. The GOC utilizes interdiction and eradication as the primary physical means to reduce the flow of cocaine out of the country. The intent is to make the cultivation of illicit crops unprofitable for the campesinos and force them to pursue alternate crops to earn their living.<sup>26</sup> Interdiction is the interception of the illicit crops post-harvest or after processing into drug form. Eradication is the destruction of the illicit crops while being cultivated and is done manually by physically pulling the plants out of the ground or by spraying with herbicides either on the ground or by aerial delivery.

The goal of eradication and interdiction within Plan Colombia is to reduce the amount of cocaine produced and transported out of Colombia. The concept relies on the basic economic principle of supply and demand. Reduce the supply of illicit drugs by destroying them at the source or in transit to the end user. A decreasing supply of a product results in a price increase (or a decrease in quality of the product). The resultant price increase will cause a decrease in demand at the end user and back up the supply chain.

Both aerial and ground herbicidal methods of eradication are controversial relative to their effectiveness in destroying sufficient quantities of illicit crops. Though the quantity of hectares sprayed has increased year to year, there has not been a significant decrease in production or distribution of cocaine from Colombia.<sup>27</sup> Farmers adapted to the GOC aerial eradication efforts by planting smaller plots of coca in areas not easily visible from the air or simply moved to another region to grow their crops.<sup>28</sup>

Secondary impacts of herbicidal spraying include the killing of adjacent legal crops as well as the sickening of farmers, their families and livestock. Though the herbicides used in Colombia have been declared safe and used throughout the world, the fact that the campesinos believe that the government spraying is affecting their livelihood and hurting their families does not bode well in the “winning the hearts and minds” component of counter-insurgency.

Depending on the source of the assessment, eradication and interdiction as key components of Plan Colombia have been declared successes and failures. In reference to eradication efforts, as explained in the Yale Journal of International Affairs, “The fumigation strategy has utterly failed to affect the price, purity, or availability of Colombian cocaine and heroin on U.S. streets. The economics is simple: if drugs are scarcer, prices should rise. But that has not happened.”<sup>29</sup> The USG assessments of eradication efforts in Colombia have been more positive. In 2004, a government official claimed, “Drug crop eradication, narcotics

interdiction, and related arrests are at record-high levels.”<sup>30</sup> The United Nations (UN) Office on Drugs and Crime and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) both support GOC claims of glowing success in eradication. However, the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) has been critical of these reports.<sup>31</sup>

### **Assistance for the Colombian National Police**

The third component of Plan Colombia addressed in this analysis is the pillar of Assistance for the Colombian National Police. The U.S. commitment to this pillar of Plan Colombia provides training, goods and services to the CNP. However, the commitment stops short of allowing the use of U.S. Forces in CN operations in Colombia.<sup>32</sup> This commitment expanded to training the Colombian military forces in counter-insurgency operations as well, but still restricted direct action by U.S. forces in support of the Colombians. The GOC and USG set a cap on the number of U.S. military personnel in Colombia to prevent mission creep and direct involvement in Colombian military operations by U.S. forces.<sup>33</sup> In addition to training, the USG provides the GOC with helicopters, crop dusting airplanes, weapons systems, and spare parts through the Military Sales Program.

U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) is managing and applying available U.S. security cooperation resources to the GOC in support of the Plan.<sup>34</sup> The helicopters, airplanes and pilot training provided to the CNP and Colombian Army (COLAR) forces have proven critical to their CN and COIN efforts throughout Colombia. Aerial Spraying and troop insertions in the southernmost areas of the country would not be possible without these capabilities.

Extensive training of Colombian Anti-Narcotics Battalions provided by U.S. Special Forces since the advent of Plan Colombia equipped the COLAR with the skill sets and confidence to take the fight to the FARC and ELN.

### **Afghanistan and the International Effort**

There are two primary military operations ongoing in Afghanistan. The largest is Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, supported by mostly U.S. forces. The second is NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) consisting of forces from 37 different nations.<sup>35</sup> Combined there are over 61,000 military personnel currently serving in Afghanistan.

Since early 2002, U.S. military operations have expanded beyond combat operations to include some elements of security, stabilization, transition and reconstruction (SSTR). The ISAF has focused on reconstruction and development efforts; while U.S. forces press the offensive in the eastern and southern parts of the country.<sup>36</sup> The ISAF is conducting limited combat operations in Afghanistan. The United Kingdom is leading the ISAF CN efforts in southern Afghanistan including intelligence gathering and analysis for interdiction and eradication efforts in conjunction with the Afghan CN authorities.<sup>37</sup>

Both ISAF and U.S. forces perform critical roles in the Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRT) working throughout Afghanistan. In addition to the international military presence, there are numerous non-governmental organizations (NGO) making contributions to the rebuilding of critical infrastructure. The U.S. and international community are working with the GOA and implementing programs aimed at stabilizing the government, providing healthcare, and creating a viable judicial system.

The opium issue that plagues Afghanistan is widely recognized by military commanders as well as U.S. Governmental agencies from the White House to the DEA to the

State Department. President Bush stated in February 2007 that narcotics are “a direct threat to a free future for Afghanistan” and warned that, “the Taliban uses drug money to buy weapons and they pay Afghans to take up arms against the government.” Afghan President Hamid Karzai has identified the opium economy as “the single greatest challenge to the long-term security, development, and effective governance of Afghanistan.”<sup>38</sup>

The fact that opium production provides a livelihood to many Afghans while also funding the Taliban / AQ is a conundrum that lacks simple resolution. It has failed to gain a resolute taskmaster to address it. Though the Department of Defense (DoD) and USCENTCOM agree that CN program in Afghanistan is a key element of our campaign against terrorism there, the military establishment has resisted a direct CN role for our forces.<sup>39</sup> This indicates a failure on the part of USCENTCOM to put appropriate emphasis on the CN effort in Afghanistan, even though they have indicated that it is a component of the DoD and National Strategy.

Until military and government leadership address the opium issue as a problem of crisis proportion, we will be fighting a two-front war within Afghanistan. Both fronts are capable of destroying the GOA, though the opium economy does so more quietly than the Taliban/AQ.

### **Are the pillars of Plan Colombia relevant to Afghanistan?**

“What will be history’s judgment on our nation-building mission in Afghanistan if the nation we leave behind is Colombia of the 1990’s?”<sup>40</sup> -- U.S. Military Officer

Lessons from the U.S. experience in Colombia are transferable to the current crisis in Afghanistan. The three components of Plan Colombia addressed in this analysis were not a panacea for defeating the FARC/ELN or eliminating the flow of drugs from Colombia.

However, every minor victory of the GOC eats away at the strength of the FARC/ELN in this long struggle. It will continue to be a war of attrition and a war of wills. Nevertheless, the GOC efforts have proven effective in weakening the insurgencies that plague them. The successes have emboldened and strengthened the national will of the Colombian people. The final chapter is unwritten. However, with each success the GOC gains strength, credibility and the confidence of the Colombian people.

The lessons learned during the course of U.S. involvement in Plan Colombia provide valuable insight into effective CN, COIN and CT efforts applied in a country at the brink of governmental collapse. Plan Colombia and President's Pastrana and Uribe's tough stance against the FARC prevented them from reaching Bogotá at the height of their power in the late 1990s.<sup>41</sup> Colombia was a country saved from the brink based on the will of the GOC, the people of Colombia and the willingness of the international community to assist.

The GOC found an appropriate balance through Plan Colombia to acquire and allocate appropriate resources (money, training, equipment) to the multi-faceted challenges they face in dealing with the FARC/ELN, cultivation of illicit crops and drug trafficking. It appears that the two most difficult components of Plan Colombia to implement were alternative economic development and effective eradication/interdiction. To be effective, the alternate development must be in place and providing income to the farmers prior to taking actions to destroy their illicit crops -- their livelihood. Similarly, Colombia demonstrates the difficulty in executing an effective interdiction and eradication program. Until the GOC can convince the campesinos to stop cultivating illegal crops, the cat and mouse game will continue. Policing and spraying will not accomplish this alone.

Military skills and CN training of the CNP and COLAR has proven to be an effective component of Plan Colombia. In the last eight years, the quantity and effectiveness of

offensive operations have improved. There are more arrests, drug lab seizures and outright desertions by FARC regulars as the GOC keeps the pressure on the FARC.<sup>42</sup>

The GOA is teetering on the brink of collapse but not in the grasp of the Taliban and AQ. Bold and decisive action by the GOA with the help of the international community can prevent Afghanistan from faltering and becoming a failed narco-state. The three components of Plan Colombia addressed in this analysis are components of the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy for Afghanistan. It is incontrovertible that strengthening a burgeoning government, especially one under siege by a well-armed insurgency, and facing enormous challenges requires international assistance. The CN and COIN/CT efforts in Afghanistan will improve if leadership adapts and implements some of the methodologies from Plan Colombia.

Significant progress towards a military victory and the accomplishment of national strategic and theater strategic objectives will remain hampered without effective change. This is possible with a dynamic shift in national strategic and theater strategic objectives that better address Afghanistan's opium problem. Until the USG, GOA, and NATO address the opium issue as part of the overall Afghanistan long-term plan, victory will be evasive.

### **Saving Afghanistan**

**“Wheat takes twice as long to grow, and we can buy almost ten times as much wheat as we could produce if we grow poppy instead.” -- An Afghani farmer<sup>43</sup>**

The outlook for influencing the narco-economy of Afghanistan in the near term is bleak. So far, efforts to reduce the nationwide reliance on drug profits have been unsuccessful. The Combatant Commander lacks the appropriate resources and directives to target illicit drug cultivation and production. The USG has taken steps to convince the GOA at diplomatic levels; however, they refuse to initiate massive eradication efforts fearing

negative impact on the environment.<sup>44</sup> “International military forces in the field have been criticized for their relatively passive role in curbing production, as the location of drug labs and traffic routes are often an open secret. The large scale production of opium in Helmand Province despite the presence of thousands of British troops exemplifies this passivity.”<sup>45</sup>

To meet the U.S. National Strategic objective in Afghanistan, there needs to be a dynamic shift in priorities at the USG and DoD levels as well as the GOA. Balancing military operations against Taliban/AQ forces with proper synchronization/timing of alternative economic development programs, and properly implementing an effective interdiction/eradication program are essential.

### **Another Perspective**

Some could argue that simply because certain components of Plan Colombia were effective in Colombia does not assure their effectiveness when applied to Afghanistan. There are significant differences in the two nations that do not lend to an equitable comparison. Specifically, tens of thousands of foreign troops do not occupy Colombia, as is the case in Afghanistan. The bulk of the insurgency in Colombia is concentrated in the jungles of southern Colombia, whereas the Taliban/AQ are spread throughout Afghanistan in much smaller groups (though many are concentrated on the border with Pakistan). Colombia, though struggling, is no longer a nation on the verge of collapse and has a functioning government, effective international trade, and overall, is a productive nation. The government and social infrastructure of Colombia are much stronger, and there is a much higher per capita income compared to Afghanistan. Only a very small minority of the Colombian population as a whole take part in the insurgency or any component of the drug trade. Therefore, the impact

of reducing the flow of drugs from Colombia will not affect the average citizen in Colombia as it would an Afghan citizen.

One could argue that the primary role of foreign military forces needs to remain focused on the military objectives that support stabilizing the GOA. Specifically, U.S. and NATO forces should focus on finding and defeating the Taliban/AQ forces. Rebuilding and reconstruction should remain a priority as well, but relegated to those nations who refuse to allow their militaries to conduct offensive operations in Afghanistan. The cultivation of poppy and the opium trade are an inherent part of the fragile economic state of Afghanistan and must not be tampered with until key military objectives are met. Only then should the GOA and allies take up the fight against illicit crops. In other words, the offensives against the Taliban/AQ and the campaign to destroy poppy fields and the opium distribution chain in Afghanistan should be consecutive actions vice concurrent.

Others would argue that Plan Colombia was a complete failure in that it did not reduce the flow of cocaine or heroin into the United States. The components of Plan Colombia simply forced the farmers and traffickers to shift their means of production and distribution. Will the same thing happen in Afghanistan? Only time will tell.

Though these are valid counter-arguments to the premise of this analysis, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the lessons learned from Plan Colombia are still relevant and applicable to Afghanistan. Though the effectiveness of the Plan had mixed results in reducing the flow of illicit drugs from Colombia, it did reap benefits for the GOC. Specifically, the Plan effectively weakened the two largest insurgency groups in Colombia while strengthening the GOC, the CNP and the COLAR. Finally, as the overall security of the country improved it provided a stimulus for economic recovery as well.

## **Recommendations**

All three pillars of Plan Colombia addressed in this analysis are part of the current USG and GOA strategy to reduce the cultivation of poppy and production of opium based products in Afghanistan. The lessons learned from Colombia are relevant, yet there does not seem to be a coherent effort in Afghanistan that optimizes these lessons. In order to be effective there needs to be a more coherent, long-range strategy to synchronize the implementation of alternative economic development, eradication/interdiction, and training. Until this occurs, no component of the Plan applied individually will make an impact on Afghanistan's narco-economy nor reduce financing the Taliban/AQ with drug profits.

These three pillars when leveraged appropriately and properly synchronized can set a course for success in Afghanistan. Finding and defeating the Taliban/AQ forces in Afghanistan should remain the primary objective for U.S forces. However, CENTCOM and NATO need to take an active role in focusing on a more direct CN role to include the implementation of alternative economic development programs, eradication/interdiction and the training of the Afghan military and police forces.

We learned from the Colombian experience that implementing alternative economic development programs is extremely difficult. In Afghanistan, this implementation should be part of a long-range plan to slowly wean farmers off poppy profits and transition them into legal crops or alternate employment. Legalizing and regulating illicit crops in the near term presents the GOA the opportunity to limit poppy cultivation and collect taxes on the harvests. There is also the potential to enter the worldwide market for the licit sale of opiates to pharmaceutical companies.

At an appropriate time, implement an aggressive ground and air-based eradication and interdiction program using Afghan police and military forces against farmers planting outside

licensed farmlands. An aggressive information operations (IO) campaign must accompany these efforts to ensure the populace understands the purpose of the eradication and assure them of the safety of the herbicide used. This is a massive undertaking based on the sheer size of Afghanistan and the difficulty in locating poppy fields in a vast landscape.

Training of the Afghan National Army and counter-narcotics forces should become a priority for U.S. and NATO military leadership. The legitimacy of an effective eradication program relies on the GOA leading this effort. To retain the confidence of the Afghan people and keep them from turning to the insurgency for assistance, the face of change must be that of an Afghan.

### **Conclusion**

The poppy plant is both a blessing and a curse to Afghanistan. The profits of the heroin driven narco-economy feed a large portion of the population yet also provide funding to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. True victory and prosperity for the people of Afghanistan will remain elusive without a concerted effort to reduce the country's reliance on a narco-economy. This requires political and military commitment from the GOA, USG, NATO and other allies. The pillars that support U.S. and Afghan National Drug Control Strategies are a starting point. There are significant challenges in implementing successful alternate economic development programs and conducting widespread eradication/interdiction in a country as large and complex as Afghanistan. Our experience in Colombia has provided valuable learning points that may be useful as part of a greater political-military effort to reduce the flow of narcotics, defeat a violent enemy, and help save Afghanistan from itself.

## End Notes

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