Shadow orders: clandestine non-state power in the international system

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CHAPTER 8 – The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's (FARC) value to this thesis' investigation lies not only in its relatively long existence, but also in its complex and hybrid character, which combines elements of a political party, guerilla group and narco-criminal organisation. The group, whose strategic and territorial gains at various times threatened the authority of Colombian state, also provides a useful window into the evolving strategic calculus of an organisation whose political and military objectives evolved from supplanting the state to, ultimately, entering in peace negotiations with the latter. As such, it demonstrates the range of considerations involved in shaping the direction and strategies of clandestine movements as well as the extent to which these are influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. In turn, this chapter successively examines the key tenets of the FARC's political ideology and doctrine, including how this was impacted by the decision to participate in the coca trade; the group's structural and organisational morphology; and the relationship between its access to resources and partners and its strategic objectives.

In doing so, it draws heavily on and is organised around this thesis' analytical framework, the latter of which also provides a basis for structured comparative investigation (this is also consistent with the approach taken within the context of the two previous case studies). The chapter once again adheres to the case study research methodology outlined in Chapter 1, including with respect to the systematic collection, categorisation and synthesis of data. Primary data was privileged wherever possible, drawing on a combination of declassified Colombian and American intelligence reporting, including debriefs with FARC sources, court documents (in both English and Spanish), financial records (some of which were obtained as part of investigations into other clandestine organisations), group propaganda materials (including online, audio and video content), and email correspondence between the group's leadership. These were supplemented by a systemic review of secondary sources, to include published academic articles, monographs and investigative journalism accounts providing insights not only into the organisation's inner-workings but also into the wider strategic context within which it operated. The analysis also sought to reflect diverging views and debates amongst observers, such as with respect to the extent to which the FARC remained driven by its ideology during its latter years. As such, the case study provides a revised take on a group that bridged the gap between a Cold War-era Marxist movement and a modern transnational criminal-insurgent organisation.

8.1 Overview: historical evolution of the FARC

The roots of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia de Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – FARC-EP or, more commonly, FARC) can be traced back to the late 1940s, when widespread social upheaval and clashes between leftist Liberals and conversative landholders triggered by the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan catalysed a decade long civil war – a period widely referred to by scholars as *la Violencia*.[809] Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, instability was driven by a mix of grievances, chief amongst which were political exclusion, poverty, corruption, and, perhaps above all, access to land.[810] These conditions gave rise to an amalgam of rural self-defence groups and armed militias, some of whom effectively carved out their own rural 'independent republics' emphasising economic self-management and defence.[811] Violence receded following a political deal struck in 1958, which resulted in the formation of a Liberal-Conservative coalition

[809] See R. E. Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978.
[810] See for example, L. Luna, *Colombian Violent Conflict: A Historical Perspective*, International Journal on World Peace, Vol. 36, No. 4, December 2019, pp. 53–84.
[811] M. del Pillar Lopez-Uribe and F. Sanchez Torres, *on the agrarian origins of the civil conflict in Colombia*, London School of Economics Latin America and Caribbean Centre Paper, May 2018, p. 9.

government: the Frente Nacional. However, despite agrarian reforms and the capture of senior armed group leaders, urban guerrilla factions – including the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC)-linked fighters of Pedro Antonio Marín operating in the Marquetalia Republic – continued to wield influence.

Dismissing government attempts to facilitate peasants' access to land in 1961 as insufficient, it was a US-backed campaign by the Colombian Army to reassert control over the independent republics (coined Operation Sovereignty) that finally pushed Marín (also known as Marulanda Vélez and 'Tirofijo'**)** to formally constitute the FARC in 1966.[812] In effect, the movement took on the mantel of the PCC's paramilitary arm, thus protecting the latter's legal status as a political party.[813] The FARC's early rhetoric, oozing Marxist language, highlighted the fact that it was adopting violence as a last resort and pointed to the key objective of securing and protecting land rights for the peasantry.[814] This, Marín claimed, would be achieved through an insurgency campaign aimed at "seizing power from capitalists and transforming the Colombian society according to Marxist doctrine."[815] The FARC's stated geographical focus also expanded, first from the Andean highlands to eastern regions such as Meta and Caqueta and then to entire country, an objective that would require overthrowing the government.[816] Moreover, this period witnessed the creation of other guerrilla groups, most notably the National Liberation Army (ELN) and People's Liberation Army (EPL).[817]

In the early 1970s, a Conservative government plan aimed at removing obstacles to free investment and large-scale commercial agriculture in rural areas exacerbated the conditions (and therefore grievances) of peasants, including by further squeezing small producers and expelling small tenants from their land.[818] During the following decade, disgruntled peasants flocked to the FARC, which grew from a movement of around 500 to an organisation of over 3,500, complete with a centralised hierarchical structure, military wing and political programme.[819] Meanwhile, and spurred on by rising demand for cocaine in the West, displaced peasants began to turn to coca cultivation as both a coping mechanism and as a social mobility strategy.[820] The FARC's leadership initially considered involvement in the drug business to be anathema to its revolutionary cause, whilst fearing that it could fuel corruption within its ranks. However, it altered its policy position in the early 1980s, levying 'protection' taxes from both cultivators and traffickers as a means of funding its armed campaign.[821] The additional influx

[812] C. Lee, *The FARC and the Colombian Left: Time for a Political Solution?*, Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 39, No. 1, January 2012, pp. 28–42; and S. Z. Daly, *The Dark Side of Power-Sharing: Middle Managers and Civil War Recurrence*, Comparative Politics, Vol. 46, No. 3, April 2014, pp. 333–53.
[813] A. Phelan, *Mapping the Pursuit of a 'Combination of All Forms of Struggle': How Colombia's Peace Agreement Complements the FARC's Political Strategy*, Small Wars Journal, February 2017, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/mapping-pursuit-combination-all-forms-struggle-how-colombias-peace-agreement-complements.
[814] R. A. Karl, *Here's the century-long history behind Colombia's peace agreement with the FARC*, Washington Post, October 1, 2016.
[815] M. del Pillar Lopez-Uribe and F. Sanchez Torres, p. 10.
[816] *Ibid*, pp. 10-11.
[817] N. Offstein and C. Aristizábal, *An Historical Review and Analysis of Colombian Guerrilla Movements: FARC, ELN and EPL*, Revista Desarrollo y Sociedad, September 2003, pp. 99-142.
[818] A. Molano, The Evolution of the FARC: a Guerrilla Group's Long History, North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), September 2007, https://nacla.org/article/evolution-farc-guerrilla-group%27s-long-history.
[819] *Ibid*.
[820] *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, International Crisis Group (ICG), February 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/87-deeply-rooted-coca-eradication-and-violence-colombia.
[821] J. Otis, *The FARC and Colombia's Illegal Drug Trade*, Wilson Center Latin American Program, November 2014, p. 3, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/misc/Otis_FARCDrugTrade2014.pdf

of funds from the coca trade further sustained the movement's growth: by the late mid-to-late 1990s it surged to over 10,000 members.

The FARC's armed campaign witnessed the combined use of tactics ranging from kidnappings, hijackings and bombings to military raids, ambushes, and attacks against government targets as well as critical national infrastructure. Moreover, narco-revenue allowed the organisation to acquire more advanced weaponry and fund a two-track, political-military strategy. Thus, it launched a new political party, the Union Patriótica in 1984, with its presidential candidate securing over 300,000 electoral votes, whilst also making gains in the 1988 municipal elections.[822] By the mid-1990s, military-tactical successes such as the capture of hundreds of Columbian soldiers helped the movement to secure large swaths of territory in the departments of Caquetá and Meta.[823] Paradoxically though, involvement in the drugs business had the effect of catalysing both internal fracture – with some factions prioritising profit over the group's original political objectives – and external threats. By the late 1990s, rival drug trafficking organisations and large landowners had allied themselves with right-wing paramilitary groups and militias known as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (or AUC), the latter of whom also often collaborated with the Colombian Army.[824]

In 1998, the Andrés Pastrana administration assumed office on the back of electoral pledges to enter in peace negotiations with the FARC as well as to roll out economic reforms and development projects. This approach also sought security assistance from external actors, primarily the United States, to bolster Colombia's armed forces – a partnership referred to as Plan Colombia.[825] Despite making some inroads, which culminated in the signing of a peace accord in February 2001, the negotiations failed to curb violence. Cease fires and the establishment of a large, demilitarised zone provided FARC units with an opportunity to reconstitute, while the government struggled to, on the one hand, maintain the support of large business groups and traditional power holders opposed to societal change and, on the other, meet wider expectations for a speedy resolution to the conflict.[826] As a result, the Conservative government of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-10), buoyed by continued American funding, pivoted towards a much more aggressive military and active policing counter-insurgency strategy aimed at recapturing and holding guerrilla controlled areas. Uribe's assumption, which was captured in his administration's Democratic Security Policy, was that the FARC would be unlikely to make political concessions unless they were on the backfoot militarily and their sources of funding cut off.[827] Although the policy did not defeat the FARC, it did have the effect of gradually eroding its overall cohesion, power base and freedom of movement, this time more clearly shaping the conditions for political dialogue.

It would take yet another administration, that of President Juan Manual Santos (2010-18), to formally bring the conflict, which had spanned half a century, to an end. A series of mediated talks hosted in Cuba paved the way for the signing of peace accords in November 2016 which*, inter alia*, agreed on a process for disarming, demobilising and reintegrating (DDR) FARC fighters. Critically, the accords succeeded where other peace processes had failed, with the FARC largely living up to its commitment to surrender its weapons. Former demobilised guerrillas also formed a

[822] *FARC*, InSight Crime report, November 2023, https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/farc-profile/.
[823] *Ibid*.
[824] J. Otis, p. 4.
[825] R. Segura and D. Mechoulan, *Historical Background and Past Peace Processes*, *Made in Havana: How Colombia and the FARC Decided to End the War*, International Peace Institute, February 2017, pp. 5–8.
[826] C. Gonzalez Posso, *Negotiation with the FARC: 1982-2002*, in M. Garcia-Duran, *Alternatives to War: Colombia's peace processes*, Accord, Conciliation Resources and Centro de Investigation y Education Popular (CINEP), 2004, p. 48.
[827] L. E. Taylor II, *Case Analysis: The FARC in Colombia*, Small Wars Journal, May 2020, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/case-analysis-farc-colombia.

political party, the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force.[828] Even then, a second implementation phase of the accords (i.e. beyond DDR) focussed on addressing structural drivers such as land reform and governance in rural areas has proven more challenging, as has been the roll-out of transitional justice and victim compensation initiatives.[829] Moreover, in August 2019, senior former FARC commanders announced a return to arms, pointing to the Colombian government's alleged "betrayal" of the provisions of the peace accords.[830] Break-away FARC dissident groups such as the Comandos de la Frontera and Carolina Ramirez Front, both comprising less than 500 members, also continued to engage in acts of violence (including against each other) as they vied for control over narco-revenue in the coca-rich state of Putumayo on the Ecuadorian border.[831] Such splinter elements show that despite a formal end to the conflict, the potential for the (re)emergence of violent non-state actors in Colombia has not altogether disappeared.

8.2 Policy choices and strategic direction

Aims and interests

Whilst the FARC's aims and objectives evolved significantly over the course of its fifty-two-year lifespan, it retained elements of its original Marxist-Leninist principles within its policies and rhetoric. For example, Garry Leach argues that the group remained committed to egalitarianism – including with respect to peasant rights, access to land and agricultural reform – throughout its existence.[832] To a degree, the group's overall objectives continued to be anchored in a deep distrust of the Colombian government as well as a reaction to oligarchic and exclusionary agricultural land control policies dating back to Spanish colonial rule.[833] As early as 1952, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara thus noted during a visit to the country that "there is more repression of individual freedom here than in any other country we've been to."[834] This sentiment, which lay at the heart of the Colombian Communist Party's (PCC) manifesto, would act as a galvanising force for the FARC's leadership and its political consistencies. The group also provided regular Marxist ideological training sessions to its fighters, whilst highlighting the extent to which it was born out of a revolutionary movement.[835]

These same 'root' political motivations continued to transpire even after the FARC shifted its policy emphasis from revolution and military defeat of the government to more a more peaceful political strategy, albeit one that continued to highlight core grievances. This policy shift occurred as well as ebbed and flowed over the course of three and a half decades, paving the way for a dual-track (military and political) approach. It started with the formation of a political wing in the mid-1980s, the Unión Patriótica (UP) party,[836] and climaxed at the time of the

[828] T. E. Flores and J. F. Vargas, *Colombia: Democracy, Violence, and the Peacebuilding Challenge*, Conflict Management and Peace Science, Vol. 35, No. 6, November 2018, pp. 581–86.
[829] T. Piconne, Peace with Justice: The Colombian Experience with Transitional Justice, Brookings Reports, July 2019, p. 3.
[830] *Colombia FARC Guerrillas "Return to Arms*", International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/colombia-farc-guerrillas-return-arms.
[831] See *'Comandos de la Frontera'*, InSight Crime, June 2022, https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-colombia/comandos-de-la-frontera/.
[832] G. M. Leech, *The FARC: the Longest Insurgency*, Black Point (NS): Fernwood Publishing Ltd, 2011, pp.38-56.
[833] Ibid, p.5.
[834] M. Deas, *Putting Up' with Violence: Ernesto Guevara, Guevarismo, and Colombia*, in P. Drinot (ed.), *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America*, Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 127–47.
[835] N. Bilotta, *A Brief Look at FARC's Origins in Colombia*, Geopolitical Monitor, April 2017, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/a-brief-look-at-farcs-origins-in-colombia/.
[836] R. Segura and D. Mechoulan, pp. 5-6. See also M. García-Sánchez and R. E. Carlin, *The FARC in the Public Eye: Negotiations, Integration, and Political Participation*, Journal of Politics in Latin America, Vol.12, Issue 3, Dec 2020, pp. 239-344.

group's negotiations with Colombian government in 2016. During the latter, the FARC stressed the importance of political representation of key FARC constituents as the basis for securing guaranteed seats in Colombia's House of Representatives and Senate.[837]

Nevertheless, the most significant change amongst the FARC policies was arguably catalysed by the decision to become involved in narco-trafficking. Although initially viewing the coca business as a threat to its revolutionary goals and even going to the lengths of imposing cultivation bans in the areas it controlled, the group – like most clandestine non-state actors – required funding to sustain its armed campaign.[838] Moreover, spiralling demand for cocaine in the United States and the corresponding production boom in Colombia (which also saw the meteoric rise of Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel) meant that coca-derived revenue provided the most direct means of purchasing weapons and paying fighters. Protecting coca cultivation also offered a means of securing the consent of peasant cultivators – a key source of political support. Perhaps inevitably, narco-derived income altered incentives within the group to the extent that by the mid-1980s, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concluded that much of the FARC's leadership "was as much attracted to […] banditry as to ideological causes," even while acknowledging that the group had not entirely lost sight of its longer-term revolutionary struggle.[839]

Furthermore, court documents reveal that in the late 1990s, the FARC's leadership voted unanimously on new resolutions that included expanding coca-production in FARC-controlled areas; establishing new production laboratories and manufacturing processes (such as using higher quality precursor chemicals); and opening further international distribution routes.[840] However, the FARC's decision to deepen its involvement in the coca trade was somewhat double-edged. On the one hand, it (at least theoretically) provided a means of expanding the FARC's political objectives and ambitions as well as of waging protracted war. On the other, it arguably played a role in shifting the group's overall emphasis away from installing a Marxist government in Bogota towards the preservation and consolidation of its sources of illicit income.[841] Thus, for the second half of its life, the FARC essentially pursued a hybrid set of objectives, blending its original narratives and rhetoric with more complex political economy incentives on the ground.

Strategic logic and sequencing

As might be expected from a Marxist movement, the FARC borrowed heavily from mid-20th century guerrilla warfare principles, including the (now familiar) teachings of Mao Tse Tung. In a strategic logic broadly drawing on Mao's three phases of warfare, the group's initial focus in the 1960s and 1970s could be described as one that prioritised organisation and consolidation – in effect Mao's 'strategic defensive' stage.[842] Frontal clashes with security forces were avoided, with the group instead opting for hit and run tactics, ambushes, and raids. The principal objective during this period was therefore to survive as a movement in the face of a stronger opponent while shaping the political ground for its longer-term campaign, including by mobilising support amongst the peasantry. As the group increased in size and potency in the late 1970s, buoyed by access to revenue, weapons and fighters, it was

[837] M. García-Sánchez and R. E. Carlin, p. 241.
[838] S. V. Norman, *The FARC and the War on Drugs in Colombia*, Universidad de los Andes Conference Paper, May 2013, pp. 10.11.
[839] *Colombia: Prospects for Peace*, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Directorate of Intelligence, April 1985 (Declassified 2012), p.9, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86T00589R000200220004-8.pdf.
[840] *Leaders of Colombian Narco-Terrorist Organisation Plead Guilty in U.S. District Court to Conspiring to import Tons of Cocaine to the United States,* United States Attorney Southern District of New York, December 16, 2009, p. 2.
[841] See also J. Otis, pp. 3-4.
[842] A. Rabasa and P. Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth, The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and Its Implications for Regional Stability*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001, p. 81.

effectively able to transition to what resembled Mao's 'strategic stalemate' phase, characterised by a more cohesive military campaign and a larger scale infiltration of territory. Whether the FARC was subsequently able to fully transition to what resembled Mao's third, 'strategic offensive' phase of protracted warfare is a matter of debate, thus calling for more detailed examination.

To be sure, the group did demonstrate the ability to conduct complex military action against Colombian army installations from the mid-1990s. For example, in August 1996, it overran a base in Las Delicias in the department of Putumayo, killing around thirty army personnel and capturing a further sixty.[843] Two years later, a FARC force numbering some seven hundred fighters surrounded and decimated the elite 52nd counter-guerrilla battalion of the Colombian army's 3rd mobile brigade.[844] Following these gains, the government of then-President Andrés Pastrana ceded a swath of territory roughly the size of Switzerland (42,000 km^2) to rebels in the southern departments of Meta and Caquetá.[845] However, and despite these gains, the group struggled to translate operational-level gains and the occasional strategic-level success into wider-reaching political control. This was partly because it struggled to maintain legitimacy, particularly within the context of high-profile terrorist attacks, and partly because it had to contend with the dual pressures of battling paramilitary groups and increasingly capable government counter-insurgency forces.

Separately, observers such as Carlos Ospina Ovalle have argued that the FARC, rather than displaying a clear, linear progression between successive phases of guerrilla warfare, pursued elements of these phases simultaneously through what he refers to as the Vietnamese-inspired concept of "interlocking war."[846] Thus, (at times hyper-local) territorial gains and political mobilisation – sought both on the battlefield and through various negotiations – were threaded across campaign objectives throughout the group's existence.[847] Such an description of the group's evolving calculus also supports the aforementioned assessment that the group increasingly opted for a two-track military-political strategy, with the ability to surge one or the other approach depending on its position in relation to its longer term objectives.

The hybrid as well as evolving morphology of the FARC also had a bearing on its strategic logic. Here was a movement that had to balance political, military and criminal-economic objectives, whilst trying to retain an element of ideological legitimacy. At times, these various lines of effort could be combined, such as within the context of mobilising the political support of coca cultivators by organising protests against government crop-eradication programmes. Historical CIA reporting also highlights the extent to which the group strategically leveraged political dialogues, truces and cease-fires to reconstitute its forces and rebuild its strength, whilst in reality having "no intention of abandoning the armed struggle."[848] Arguably however, this balancing act also led to strategic drift and competing internal interests, undermining the Clausewizian logic of clearly aligning one's ways and means to the political end state. Moreover, and as hinted at above, the character of the FARC's military strategy and, in particular, the use of terrorist tactics, including assassinations and kidnappings, contributed to galvanising public sentiment against the group. Illustratively, one anti-FARC protest held in

[843] *Interrogantes Sobre El Asalto A Las Delicias*, El Tiempo, September 3, 1996, https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-489049.
[844] See T. Marks*, Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency*, US Army War College publication, January 2022, p. 8.
[845] C. Sabatini and R. Berger, *Santos Holds the Line Against the FARC – And Wins*, Americas Quarterly, November 2011, https://www.americasquarterly.org/blog/santos-holds-the-line-against-the-farc-and-wins/.
[846] C. Ospina Ovalle, *Legitimacy as the center of gravity in Hybrid warfare*, Journal of Military and Strategic Studies (JMSS), Vol. 17, Issue 4, June 2017, p. 255.
[847] Ibid, pp.254-262.
[848] *Colombia: Prospects for Peace*, CIA, p. 11.

2008 in Bogota counted between 500,000 and 2 million protesters, with further protests being held in other cities around the world.[849]

Spheres of influence and territorial control

As is often the case with insurgencies and guerrilla movements, territorial control was a critical component of the FARC's strategy. This not only constituted an end but also a means of consolidating its economic and military gains as well as its power base. Over the years, the group secured territory spanning from Southern Colombia to the Eastern Plaines situated near the Venezuelan border, whilst also establishing a presence in the southwestern departments of Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño as well as in western departments such as Antioquia and Chocó.[850] By 2002, the group was present in around half of Colombia's territory, or in 514 of the country's 1098 municipalities.[851] With most of Colombia's population concentrated in urban centres, the FARC's territorial strategy largely focussed on underdeveloped rural communities where the state's presence was limited.[852]

In turn, the group essentially sought to harness the absence of formal (i.e. state) governance by promoting itself as a protector of marginalised communities and even launching local infrastructure projects. For example, FARC-built roads – which involved engineers and heavy machinery such as bulldozers – increased the group's freedom of movement and likely secured a degree of legitimacy amongst local populations.[853] Such activities can be broadly situated within the logic of erecting alternative non-state actor governance systems in marginalised communities, whilst also underlining the extent to which infrastructure projects are not solely within the purview of the state. Roads and bridges built by the FARC in localities such as Puerto Guzmán (Putumayo department) in the 1990s offered an alternative to dangerous river travel as well as a key enabler for the transport of coca, the principal local cash crop.[854]

Critics of successive governments' various attempts at striking political deals with the FARC point to the fact that the group consistently harnessed talks to expand its geographic footprint in strategic locations.[855] Indeed, and as we have seen, the group exploited the so-called 'demilitarized zone' (DMZ) consisting of territory ceded by the Pastrana government in Caquetá and Meta in the late 1990s.[856] While the political incentive behind Pastrana's concession was to create space for negotiations, the group transformed the DMZ into a logistical hub for the purpose of ammunition stockpiling, attack planning and hostage-holding.[857] Subsequently, Colombia's reinvigorated military offensive launched by the Uribe administration in the early 2000 and continued under President Santos significantly reduced the group's territorial control, displacing its fighters to more remote and sparsely populated

[849] C. Lee, *The FARC and the Colombian Left: Time for a Political Solution?*, Latin American Perspectives, Vol.39, No.1, January 2012, p. 28
[850] J. Petras and M. M. Brescia, *The FARC Faces the Empire*, Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 27, Issue 114, September 2000, p. 134; See also *FARC* (In Sight Crime, 2023).
[851] *Improving Security Policy in Colombia*, International Crisis Group (ICG) Report, June 2010, p. 2.
[852] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, *Violence in Colombia, in Arms Trafficking and Colombia*, 1st ed., Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003, p. 10.
[853] S. Uribe, S. Otero-Bahamón, I. Penaranda, *Hacer el estado: carreteras, conflicto y órdenes locales en los territorios de las FARC*, Reviata de Estudios Sociales, No.75, January 2021, pp.87-100.
[854] Ibid. See also: S. Otero-Bahamón *et al.*, *Seeing like a Guerrilla: the logic of infrastructure in the building of insurgent orders*, Geoforum, Vol.133, July 2022, pp. 198-207.
[855] See for example: F. E. Marre, *FARC'S Façade and Other Major Obstacles to a Genuine Peace in Colombia*, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis, Vol.6, Issue 6, July 2014, p. 7.
[856] T. Marks, p. 8.
[857] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p. 11.

areas, thus reducing its ability to exert influence over local political constituencies.[858] This arguably pushed FARC elements to further capitalise on criminal activities, including trafficking across the long (2200 kilometres) Venezuelan border, as well as establish high-volume processing laboratories in Bolivia.[859]

External relations

The FARC's relations with both state and non-sate actors were complex and varied. Coming of age within the broader context of the Cold War, the group developed connections with Soviet bloc and/or aligned countries, with its fighters being trained at different times by Cuban and El Salvadorian operatives.[860] Moreover, from the late 1970s to early 1990s, the Vietnamese armed forces both received fighters at a specialist Sapper Training School, where it provided FARC personnel with knowledge of bomb-making and explosives, and provided more localised training opportunities via a clandestine team stationed in Nicaragua.[861] Cuba likely played a central role in facilitating this support, including by acting as an intermediary for Vietnamese trainers,[862] whilst at times also providing weapons directly to the FARC. [863] The so called 'FARC files', a large trove of documents attributed to Luis Edgar Devía Silva (Aka Raúl Reyes), the head of the FARC's International Committee (the COMINTER), which was recovered during a 2008 raid in Ecuador, further exposed the group's links to Venezuela. The files pointed to financial assistance by former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, whilst suggesting that Venezuelan army officers assisted the group in obtaining capabilities such as rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs).[864] Responsibility for liaising with the FARC fell to Venezuelan General Hugo Carvajal, head of military intelligence, and Interior Minister Ramón Rodríguez Chacín, the latter of whom reciprocally suggested that the FARC share its knowledge of guerrilla warfare, including "modes of operation, explosives, camps in the jungle, preparing ambushes, logistics and mobility; […] everything that would be required to react appropriately to a US invasion."[865] The fact that Reyes, who was killed in the raid, appeared to operate freely from Ecuador also raises questions about the extent to which that country's government may have turned a blind eye to his presence on its soil.

The FARC's relations with clandestine non-state actors were somewhat more erratic, ranging from loose alliances to open warfare. FARC elements forged cross-border smuggling partnerships, including with criminal networks in Venezuela, Bolivia and Peru (the latter of which shares a 1,600km-long border with Colombia) as well as the Mexican Sinaloa, Beltrán Leyva, and Jalisco Nueva Generación cartels controlling facilitation routes into the United States.[866] Such partnerships continued to be fostered by remnants of the FARC in the wake

[858] *The Day after Tomorrow: Colombia's FARC and the End of Conflict*, Crisis Group Latin America Report No.53, December 2014, p. 5.
[859] See for example: R. Graham, *FARC Rebels Tied to Traffickers in Bolivia*, InSight Crime, December 2011, p.1, https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/farc-rebels-tied-to-traffickers-in-bolivia/.
[860] See T. Marks, *A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs. FARC*, Military Review Vol.87, Issue 2, Mar-Apr 2007, p. 50.
[861] M. L. Pribbenow, *Vietnam Trained Commando Forces in Southeast Asia and Latin America*, Wilson Centre Cold War International History Project, Dossier No.28, December 2011, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/vietnam-trained-commando-forces-southeast-asia-and-latin-america.
[862] Ibid.
[863] See K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p. 15.
[864] *'The FARC files'*, The Economist, May 22, 2008, https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2008/05/22/the-farc-files.
[865] J. Glüsing, *How Hugo Chavez Courted FARC*, Spiegel International, June 04, 2008, https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-colombian-connection-how-hugo-chavez-courted-farc-a-557736.html.
[866] S. Corona, *FARC guerrillas working with Mexican cartels to ship cocaine into the US*, El País, 06 November 2015, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2015/11/06/inenglish/1446805362_627422.html#.

of the 2016 peace agreement, albeit at a much more localised scale. Over the years, the FARC tolerated its fellow rural revolutionary Marxist movement, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the two groups occasionally collaborated in their respective strongholds, whilst establishing lines of communications between their highest leadership structures (i.e., the FARC's Secretariate and the ELN's equivalent Central Command body).[867] However, and perhaps inevitably, the two also competed for financial resources as well as control of trafficking corridors (primarily on the Venezuelan border) – a dynamic which at times boiled over into violent skirmishes.[868]

Such tensions paled in comparison to the animosity that arose between the FARC and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a coalition of pre-existing right-wing paramilitary groups supported by landowners, ranchers and businessmen that gained significant momentum from 1997 onwards. Whilst retaining a narrative of thwarting the expansion of leftist guerrillas in the country, the AUC became increasingly involved in drug trafficking activities (elements of the groups also had historical connections to cartels, including Pablo Escobar's Medellin-based operation and the Ochoa Brothers).[869] Moreover, the AUC acted as a de facto-proxy for elements of the Colombian army within the context of counter-insurgency operations, receiving weapons and ammunition from the latter, whilst enjoying ties to the political elite during the tenure of President Uribe.[870] The highly potent and violent AUC repeatedly clashed head-on with both the FARC and the ELN, displacing guerrillas from swaths of the country, whilst also targeting communities from which they drew support.[871] In turn, the rise of the paramilitaries and alternative non-state power blocks both escalated Colombia's civil war and compelled the FARC to fight on multiple as well as concurrent fronts, further reducing their ability to focus on their original objectives.

8.3 Organisational structure

Possibly comprising as many as 20,000 members at its highpoint, the FARC opted for what (at least on paper) resembled a traditional vertical operating model as well as command-and-control structure. Its most senior decision-making body consisted of the Secretariat, which constituted the group's chief political organ, whilst also providing direction relating to military strategy.[872] It was composed of around seven senior members, including chief negotiators and high-ranking commanders. The Secretariat was led by FARC founding member Manuel Marulanda Velez until his death in May 2008. Valez not only served as overall leader but also played an instrumental role in shaping the group's direction, including by calling successive

[867] *Colombia: Moving Forward with the ELN?,* International Crisis Group, Policy Briefing No.16, October 2007, pp. 5-6.
[868] Ibid.
[869] *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC*, InSight Crime, June 2024, https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/auc-profile/.
[870] *Declassified Documents Key to Judgment Against Colombian Paramilitary*, National Security Archive, October 2021, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/colombia/2021-10-04/declassified-documents-key-judgment-against-colombian; and *The Friends of 'El Viejo": Declassified Records Detail Suspected Paramilitary, Narco Ties of Former Colombian President Uribe*, National Security Archive, August 2020, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/colombia/2020-08-31/friends-el-viejo-declassified-records-detail-suspected-paramilitary-narco-ties-former-colombian.
[871] See L. Luna, *Colombian Violent Conflict*, International Journal on World Peace, Vol. 36, No. 4, December 2019, pp.53-84; and A. Rabasa et al., *Counter-insurgency Transition Case Study: Colombia*, *From Insurgency to Stability: Volume II: Insights from Selected Case Studies*, RAND, 2011, p. 43.
[872] *FARC Guerrilla Commanders and Paramilitary Group Members Comment on Their Organizations and Activities*, US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), Intelligence Information Report, February 1999 (Declassified October 2021), p. 2, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/25109-document-7-farc-guerrilla-commanders-and-paramilitary-group-members-comment-their.

guerrilla conferences setting the group's political and strategic course.[873] Guillermo Leon Saenz (Aka Alfonso Cano), a former anthropologist turned hard-line ideologue who had advocated for the use of hit and run tactics in an approach dubbed *Plan Renacimiento* (or Rebirth), subsequently took over the mantle until he was killed by Colombian forces in 2011, only to be replaced by Timoleon Jimenez, Aka Timochenko.[874] In turn, the fact that the organisation was able to manage leadership transitions reflects a degree of structural resilience likely aided by tried and tested internal processes.

Sitting alongside the Secretariat – and featuring Secretariat members - was a Central High Command (Estado Mayor), which counted two dozen members, and which was responsible for providing direction to sub-formations as well as appointing local commanders. Reporting to the Central High Command were seven *blocs*, each comprising their own support staffs, with responsibility for different geographic zones.[875] *Blocs* were further split into local military units, or *fronts*, counting up to 300 members. [876] These *fronts*, which sometimes also comprised smaller columns, companies and squads, varied in number over the course of the years. For example, the FARC's strength grew from around 32 *fronts* in 1986 to 60 *fronts* in 1995.[877] Despite the FARC's nominally vertical structure, declassified intelligence assessments reveal the extent to which the localised character of the *front* model offered a certain degree of independence and flexibility, including with respect to raising funds.[878] At times, the group combined multiple fronts and columns to create larger, massed combat formations capable of conducting more conventional military operations. Specialised mobile columns within *fronts* could also be bolstered to constitute a rough equivalent to the concept of a military battlegroup, as was seen within the context of the 'Teofilo Forero' column's defeat of the 52nd Counter-guerrilla Battalion in March 1998. [879] Meanwhile, the *blocs* provided a form of operational-level "transmission belt" between Central High Command strategic planners and tactical-level units.[880]

FARC *fronts* also provided a core localised population-control as well as rudimentary governance function. This included functioning as a shadow judiciary body via 'people's courts', disseminating FARC propaganda and encouraging economic output in their respective areas of responsibility.[881] As cadre structures (i.e. organisational units), *fronts* were also envisaged as having the ability to multiply over time once these had secured their population base and means of sustainment, with new *fronts* being spun off within conquered territory.[882]

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[873] See for example: *Narcotics Reward Programme: Pedro Antonio Marin*, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, US Department of State, https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/narc/rewards/115255.htm.
[874] *Guillermo Leon Saenz Vargas, alias 'Alfonso Cano'*, In Sight Crime, March 2017, https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/guillermo-leon-saenz-vargas-alfonso-cano/.
[875] D. Cunnigham, *Brokers and key players in the internationalization of the FARC*, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Vol. 36, Issue 6, May 2013, p. 482.
[876] *Colombia: an overview of the Farc's military structures*, European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre (ESISC), December 2010, https://www.esisc.org/publications/briefings/colombia-an-overview-of-the-farcs-military-structure.
[877] *The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade*, Transnational Institute, June 1999, https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-revolutionary-armed-forces-of-colombia-farc-and-the-illicit-drug-trade.
[878] *Colombia's insurgency: Military Implications From Las Delicias to Mitu*, Defence Intelligence Assessment, US Department of Defense (DoD), February 1999 (Declassified), p.2.
[879] Defence Intelligence Assessment (1999), p. 3.
[880] A. Shesterinina, *Committed to Peace: The Potential of Former FARC-EP Midlevel Commanders as Local Leaders in the Peace Process*, University of Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, 2020, p. 6.
[881] Defence Intelligence Assessment (1999), pp. 2-3.
[882] Ibid.

[883] Furthermore, *fronts* became a focal point for narcotics production and trafficking from the late 1990s, featuring appointed members responsible for coordinating these activities. Judicial documents reveal how key *front* coordinators, the likes of which included Juan Jose Martinez-Vega (16th *front*) and Erminso Cuevas Cabrera (14th *front*), took on a central role both in overseeing high-volume cocaine laboratories and facilitating onward trafficking via cross-border networks.[884] Moreover, the cases of Rodriguez Mendieta (Aka "Ivan Vargas") and Gerardo Aguiler Ramirez ("Aka Cesar"), former commanders of the FARC's 24th *front* and 1st *front,* show how *front* commanders themselves became active in the trade, including with respect to brokering partnerships and opening new international trafficking routes.[885]

Recruitment, training, and support

The FARC's early recruitment strategy placed a significant emphasis on its Marxist-revolutionary ideological narrative and principles, which was tailored to the circumstances as well as political grievances of rural populations – particularly peasant farmers and 'campesinos' locked out of Colombia's elite bargain.[886] The FARC also played on the common themes of status, purpose and meaning in the context of its recruitment drives alongside gendered narratives. For example, interviews with former female members highlight the extent to which the offer of a life of adventure and the promise (rather than necessarily reality) of gender equality played a role in their recruitment.[887] Female role models such as the notorious 'Karina' (Elda Neyis Mosquera), who rose through the ranks to command the 47th *front,* provided an example of such advancement within the group.[888] At the same time, and perhaps unsurprisingly, declassified intelligence documents detailing interviews with FARC members suggest that many recruits were driven by financial considerations, including the perception that "they had no other opportunities for employment."[889] Furthermore, the group paid rural recruits working as seasonal workers on coca plantations a salary of around US$250 per month to serve as active members in military camps for periods spanning between six months and a year.[890] Intelligence documents also reveal that fighters wishing to go on leave, such as to visit their families, were given a stipend and had their travel expenses paid for them.[891] Over time, the need to sustain its prolonged armed campaign led the group to engage in forced recruitment, with human rights organisations reporting on the coerced mobilisation of minors under the age of fifteen (the group considered child soldiers to be easily mouldable, according

[883] This logic resembles a variation of the counter-insurgency strategy of 'ink-spots' in which recaptured territory provides the basis for campaign expansion via focussed 'clear, hold and build' activities.
[884] *Two Top Associates of Colombian Narco-Terrorist Organization Found Guilty of Conspiring to Import Tons of Cocaine into the United States*, United States Attorney, Southern District of New York, April 2010, pp. 1-4.
[885] *Leaders of Colombian Narco-Terrorist Organization Plead Guilty in US District Court to Conspiring to Import Tons of Cocaine into the United States*, United States Attorney, Southern District of New York, December 2009, p. 2.
[886] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p. 4.
[887] K. Stanski, *Terrorism, Gender, and Ideology: A Case Study of Women who join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)*, Terrorism, Gender and Ideology, In J. J. F. Forest (ed.), *The Making of a Terrorist; Recruitment, Training and Root Causes*, Vol. 1, Westport: Praeger, 2006, pp.140-143.
[888] See S. Gill, *Colombia releases one of FARC's most feared former commanders*, Colombia Reports, November 2, 2017, https://colombiareports.com/amp/colombia-releases-one-farcs-feared-former-commanders/.
[889] US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) Report (1999), p. 2.
[890] S. Logan and A. Morse, *The FARC's International Presence*, Seguranca & Democracia, December 2006, pp.4.
[891] F*ARC Guerrilla Commanders and Paramilitary Group Members Comment on Their Organizations and Activities*, US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Intelligence Information Report, February 1999 (Declassified October 2021), p.2

to sources).[892] Forced recruitment also took place amongst socially vulnerable cleavages and groups, most notably indigenous and Afro-Columbian populations.[893]

The training of new FARC recruits took several forms. Typically, these involved a three-month programme comprising basic training, including small arms handling (typically AK-47 variant and M-16), fire-and-manoeuvre tactics and jungle warfare.[894] Military instructors used a combination of classroom-based lessons and applied training, such as with respect to military planning processes and the execution of 'set piece' operations such as ambushes.[895] This instruction was likely complemented by more specialised training on specific weapon systems such as sniper rifles, mines and 60 and 81mm mortars.[896] Training was also accompanied by ideological indoctrination, with programmes placing a heavy emphasis on group identity (which was reinforced through the frequent use of war names) and discipline, including adherence to the group's core principles and hierarchy.[897] In a recurrent theme amongst armed non-state actor groups, the FARC's ability to establish training infrastructure and deliver formal instruction was directly correlated with territorial control. Thus, the government's introduction of a new demilitarised zone in 1998 (see above) allowed it to double the size of its training camps. Conversely, the group was in its later years compelled to adopt more rudimentary 'on the job' training following military setbacks.

The group featured several categories of fighters and members within its ranks. Full-time, uniformed fighting units were complemented by urban Bolibarian militias (*milicias bolivarianos)* as well as popular militias (*milicias populares*). Whilst receiving military training, members of these militias tended to adopt civilian attire and live at home, typically establishing a presence in population centres and conducting intelligence, revenue collection and, occasionally, subversive activities.[898] In a logic somewhat akin to Che Guevarra's *foquismo*, the militias – created following a Central General Staff Plenary Session in 1989 – were intended as a vanguard that could bolster an eventual general offensive within strategic localities.[899] In effect, the militias also provided a foothold into potential constituencies of support, augmenting wider recruitment, propaganda and infrastructure-development efforts. Indeed, and despite the appeal of the group's Marxist principles amongst segments of the population, the FARC had to navigate the inherent tension between, on the one hand, maintaining a core radical base and, on the other, gaining the support of the 'masses'.[900] Thus, embedding militias within the local population was likely perceived (at least in theory) as a means of increasing the group's visibility – and, therefore, legitimacy – amongst the wider public.

Ultimately however, the FARC's predatory activities, pivot towards drugs trafficking and use of violence gradually eroded popular support for its cause. Illustratively, studies tracking

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[892] See for example: *'You'll Learn Not to Cry': Child Combatants in Colombia*, Human Rights Watch, September 2003, pp. 29-30.
[893] *Improving Security Policy in Colombia* (ICRG 2010), pp. 1-5.
[894] K. Stanski, p. 143.
[895] *Can the FARC Still Train Their Soldiers?*, InSight Crime, March 2011, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/inside-can-the-farc-still-train-their-soldiers/.
[896] See for example: *UN observers Conclude FARC-EP arms removal process in Colombia*, United Nations, August 2017, https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/08/563392.
[897] *FARC - Rebels with a Cause?,* Council on Hemispheric Affairs, July 2010, https://coha.org/farc-–- rebels-with-a-cause/.
[898] *Sobreviviendo al infierno: Las Farc desde adentro, Ministerio de Defensa Nacional*, Bogota, p.132, https://www.mindefensa.gov.co/irj/go/km/docs/Mindefensa/Documentos/descargas/Prensa/Documentos/SobreviviendoAlInfierno.pdf.
[899] J. Contreras, *FARC-EP. Insurgency, terrorism, and drug trafficking in Colombia*: Memory and discourse, Madrid: Dykinson, 2018, pp. 243-257.
[900] C. Roux, *Communicating the Revolution: A Cultural Analysis of FARC Propaganda and its Reception in Colombia (1964-2022)*, Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas / Universidad Nacional de Colombia, February 2023.

casualty rates during Colombia's civil war show that 81.5% of the victims of violence were civilians, mostly peasants.[901] Disengagement also extended to the rank and file of the organisation, with desertion rates climbing significantly from the 2000s (Colombia's Ministry of Defense reported over 19,000 deserters between 2002 and 2017).[902] This erosion of internal cohesion was further exacerbated by the loss of key leaders following counter-insurgency operations conducted by the Colombian military. Furthermore, observers examining the range of factors that contributed to a reduction in support for the FARC point to a shift away from collective identity and ideologies to individual interests.[903] In turn, the changing tide of public perception, combined with internal fragmentation, played an important role in convincing the FARC to join the negotiating table in 2016, paving the way for demobilisation. Following this process, the new political arm of the ex-FARC continued to struggle with the legacy of the movement, failing to secure significant support or to repair fractures in its diminished political base.[904]

8.4 Levers of power

Military and intelligence capabilities

As we have seen, and despite at times coming close to resembling a conventional force, the FARC's military strategy and accompanying capabilities largely remained within the realm of guerilla warfare. Still, an agenda of an annual meeting of the FARC Secretariate published in August 2000 by the Colombian weekly magazine Semana featured a statement by the group's leadership stressing that "the acquisition of arms […] has permitted a qualitative jump in our process of becoming an Ejército del Pueblo (Army of the People)."[905] Like other Latin American armed groups, the FARC drew heavily on Cold-War era stockpiles of weapons gifted by the United States and former Soviet Union to their respective proxies that had since proliferated across the sub-continent.[906] The group's weapons of choice for fighting units consisted primarily of Kalashnikov AK-47 variants, Rocket Propelled Grenade launchers and Belgian-made FAL, Israeli-made Galil and US-made Barret assault rifles, which were further bolstered by mortars along with an ample supply of ammunition (primarily 7.62 calibre rounds).[907] Some sources suggest that the FARC imported just under half of its weapons by air via small, single engine charter aircraft departing from Brazil.[908] US intelligence estimates concluded that the group also likely ran its own munitions factories capable of producing mortars and rifle-mounted grenades.[909]

The group's tactical playbook, which drew heavily on the guerilla's *modus operandi*, including an emphasis on asymmetric activities ranging from ambushes to kidnappings and assassinations, called for capabilities that fell within what might be described as the terrorist's and insurgent's arsenal. It manufactured and employed (with a degree of success) improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and makeshift anti-personnel mines, typically using either conventional ordnance such as shells or commercial-grade explosives as the main charge.

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[901] A. Blanco *et al*., *Violent Extremism and Moral Disengagement: A Study of Colombian Armed Groups*, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 37, Issue 2, March 2020, p. 427.
[902] E. Nussio and J. E. Ugarriza, *Why Rebels Stop Fighting: Organizational Decline and Desertion in Colombia's Insurgency*, International Security, Vol. 45, Issue 4, Spring 2021, p. 170.
[903] *Ibid*, pp. 170-171.
[904] See for example: L. Yordi, *Colombia elections 2022: An uncertain political future for the former FARC guerilla*, London School of Economics, March 2022, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2022/03/15/colombia-elections-uncertain-future-farc/.
[905] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p. 5.
[906] Ibid, p.11.
[907] J. C. Mejía Azuero *et al*., *Ammunition in Colombia: General Regulatory Aspects, Administración & Desarrollo*, Vol. 50, No. 1, June 2020, p.85, https://doi.org/10.22431/25005227.vol50n1.4.
[908] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p.*xx*.
[909] Defence Intelligence Assessment (1999), p. 6.

For example, its notorious 'bunker buster' bomb consisted of a propane cylinder which acted as an exploding projectile.[910] Meanwhile, more rudimentary devices were constructed using a combination of precursors and fertiliser, in some cases incorporating Claymore-style nails, nuts and bolts.[911] By 2014, these devices featured in seventy five percent of attacks on Colombian military personnel.[912] At least part of this bomb-making knowledge was drawn from the experience of wider organisations around the world, including the Irish Provisional Republican Army (PIRA), who had extensive experience in the use of explosives.[913]

The FARC's armed and infiltrative activities consistently drew on intelligence systems and capabilities, primarily delivered through a decentralised network of human sources and militiamen. These provided time-sensitive tactical-level information, including with respect to troop movements and potential targets.[914] This access was put to effective use in the lead-up to the groups' assault on the Las Delicias military base in 1996 as well as the siege at Mitu and the battle of El Billar in 1998. During these events, intelligence-gathering and prestrike reconnaissance activity acted as a prelude to the application of indirect fires and manoeuvre.[915] Whilst the FARC's remote and frequent change of encampments, combined with harsh punishments for informants, provided for effective counter-intelligence, the group was not impervious to infiltration, particularly when Colombian military intelligence improved from the 2010s onwards. Illustrative of this development was the killing of top leader Alfonso Cano in November 2011 following an ambitious intelligence operation that involved placing infiltrated agents deep into FARC-controlled territory, alongside the use of signals intelligence feeds.[916]

Communication and propaganda

The FARC's communication and propaganda strategy, whilst evolving over time, remained reasonably traditional with respect to both its content and means of propagation. The group targeted its propaganda efforts at two separate audiences. Firstly, and as briefly alluded to, it developed content that was geared towards the indoctrination of members and recruits, the latter of whom were obliged to read materials such as the group's accepted political theories for around two hours a day.[917] A heavy emphasis was placed on collective identity, with members discouraged to use the first person when communicating.[918] The group's internal narratives, whilst drawing on core Marxist tenets, also sought to stoke animosity towards various social groups and cleavages ranging from the political elite and Colombian military to the clergy as a means of constructing an 'us versus them' paradigm and further legitimising its armed campaign.[919] The second intended audience for the FARC's propaganda efforts

[910] T. J. Sacquety, *Forty Years of Insurgency: Colombia's Main Opposition Groups*, Veritas, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2006, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_40years_insurgency_page_1.html.
[911] *US Military Helps Colombia Fight IED Threat*, US Southern Command News Release, US Department of Defence, June 10, 2014, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/602850/us-military-helps-colombia-fight-ied-threat/.
[912] Ibid.
[913] J. McDermott and C.C. Aaron, FARC Gives Notice of an Urban Campaign, Janes Intelligence Review, Vol. 14, Issue 9, September 2022, pp. 24-25.
[914] See for example: J. A. Gentry and D. E. Spencer, *Colombia's FARC: A Portrait of Insurgent Intelligence, Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 25, Issue 4, December 2010, pp.453-478.
[915] Defence Intelligence Assessment (1999), pp. 3-6.
[916] See *'The downfall of FARC leader Alfonso Cano'*, Strategic Comments, Vol. 17, Issue 9, December 2011, pp.1-4; and *Tecnología, inteligencia, mil hombres y gente de las FARC acabaron con 'Alfonso Cano'*, RTVE, November 05, 2011, https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20111105/santos-confirma-gente-farc-ayudo-a-acabar-con-alfonso-cano/473499.shtml.
[917] P.S Nader, *Former Members' Perspective are Key to Impacting the FARC*, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2013, p. 77.
[918] Ibid, p. 78.
[919] Ibid, pp. 78-79.

consisted of potential supporters within areas of (intended) territorial control. The group's leadership regularly employed a combination of speeches and press communiqués in order to spread its discourse and promote its cause and ideals to prospective sympathisers.[920] Moreover, it leveraged a combination of short-wave radio broadcasts and popular mediums such as music in order to increase the appeal of its messages, even dabbling in *música fariana*, or 'FARC music'.[921] Similarly, intercepted emails linked to the FARC's senior leadership in 2000 revealed plans to create a dedicated album that would cost around US $150,000 and feature musicians from the Dominican Republic – a regional centre for music production – as well as songs containing catchy lyrics such as "Taca taca taca, the government will fall" (top leader Manuel Marulanda himself was said to be behind the idea).[922]

At the same time, interviews with former combatants highlight the extent to which the FARC's presence and visibility in held areas as well as its provision of core public functions such as dispute resolution, which contrasted with the absence of formal state governance, was the largest contributor to its appeal and credibility (in effect conveying an 'actions speak louder than words' logic).[923] Admittedly, the FARC did experiment with more modern forms of communication and propaganda, albeit at a late stage. It created its own online news outlet – initially called the *Insurgent Bulletin* (*el Informativo Insurgente*) and subsequently renamed *New Colombia News* (*Nueva Colombia Noticias*) – within the context of the Havana peace talks, producing digital content in a format that emulated Colombian news broadcasts with a view to legitimise its demands and extend the reach of its public relations campaign to the wider public.[924] News bulletins highlighting government double standards and the validity of the group's grievances and political cause were also posted on YouTube and distributed via social media accounts.[925] Ultimately however, the FARC's relatively late entrance onto the digital scene meant that its efforts in this space palled in comparison with the government's well-oiled strategic communications machine. The group's leadership thus conceded in the early stages of the Havana process that "that politically and propagandistically they hit us really hard."[926]

Crime and narco-trafficking

The FARC's entry and deepening involvement in the regional narcotics trade was, as we have seen, a controversial feature of the insurgency's evolution. In the mid-1990s, the fragmentation of Colombia's major trafficking cartels – who had tended to purchase their coca from Bolivia and Peru – opened up the field for new entrants and fuelled agricultural production of the plant in Colombia. Indeed, in 1997 the country became the largest coca-producing nation.[927] In turn, coca's profitability and ease of transport encouraged agricultural migrants to travel to production areas, catalysing rural population growth.[928] Thus, the FARC's leadership begrudgingly turned to the cocaine trade as a logical means of sustaining its campaign by

[920] See for example: A. Blanco *et al*., p. 444.
[921] R.C. Quishpe, *Corcheas insurgents: usos y funciones de la música de las FARC-EP durante el conflict armado en Colombia***,** Universidad de los Andes, April 2018, pp. 1-59.
[922] R. Carroll, *Guerrillas in the mix,* The Guardian, February 25, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/25/farc-colombia-pop-record-recruitment.
[923] P.S Nader, pp. 82-83.
[924] A. L. Fattal, *Uploading the News After Coming Down the Mountain: The FARC's Experiment with Online Television in Cuba, 2012-2016*, International Journal of Communication, Vol. 11, 2017, p.3838.
[925] Ibid, p. 3833.
[926] Ibid, p. 3839.
[927] *Coca Cultivation and Eradication*, Colombia Peace, March 28, 2020, https://colombiapeace.org/coca-cultivation-and-eradication/.
[928] See also: *M. L.* Dion, Michelle and C. Russler, *Eradication Efforts, the State, Displacement and Poverty: Explaining Coca Cultivation in Colombia during Plan Colombia*, Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 40, No. 3, August 2008, pp. 399–421.

levying tax on producers, laboratories and drug shipments in exchange for protection.[929] The group's defence of producers sometimes took on highly visible forms, such as when it shot down two aerial spraying, 'crop-duster' aircraft in 2013, resulting in a temporary suspension in (highly toxic) arial eradication via fumigation.[930] Beyond economic interests, some observers have argued that the group's involvement in the drug economy also stemmed from political motivations, including as an enabler for governance activities and as a means of supporting peasant smallholders.[931] Arguably, income derived from the trade also reduced the FARC's appetite to negotiate on serious terms with the government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, not least because it did not need to make concessions on the grounds of financial difficulty.[932]

Despite these arguments, the FARC's narcotics-related activities increasingly resembled those of a fully-fledged professional trafficking organisation. Protection taxes gradually gave way to more active control of coca plantations, which extended into Peru's northern borderlands. In the late 1990s, the FARC's leadership ordered the group to become the exclusive buyer of raw cocaine paste in occupied territories, with the latter eventually controlling as much as 70 percent of narcotics production in Colombia.[933] It further mandated that part of this cocaine paste be exchanged for weapons in a dynamic often referred to in the insurgency literature as a 'drug for weapons' economy.[934] The group also established cross-border smuggling and facilitation networks, working with the Mexican Tijuana, Gulf, and Sinaloa Cartels as well as corrupt border-security personnel (including elements of Venezuela's National Guard), importing precursor chemicals into Colombia and, according to some reports, infiltrating maritime ports and airports.[935] In addition, Colombian intelligence personnel reported FARC attempts at establishing contacts in European importation hubs such as Amsterdam and Brussels under the guise of the *Bolivarian Continental Coordination Body (Coordinadora Continental Bolivariana)*.[936] Meanwhile, the FARC's own cocaine-processing activities expanded to include the oversight of high-capacity and high-purity laboratories located as far as Bolivia's Cochabamba province.[937] Ultimately, Colombian official analyses concluded that by the early 2010s, as many as eight FARC *fronts* had largely abandoned their guerilla activities in favour of narco-trafficking.[938]

The FARC's criminal activities did not stop there. The group integrated kidnappings-for-ransom within its *modus operandi*, claiming that these targeted corrupt politicians and officials.[939] High-profile acts included the capture and murder of former culture minister Consuelo Araujonoguera in 2001, the kidnapping of presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt in 2002 (who had advocated for negotiation) and the abduction of Colombian National Police

[929] R. Vargas Meza, *The FARC the War and the Crisis of the State*, North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA)September 25, 2007, https://nacla.org/article/farc-war-and-crisis-state.
[930] C. Kraul, *Anti-coca spraying halted in Colombia after 2 U.S. pilots shot down,* Los Angeles Times, December 16, 2013.
[931] J. Gutiérrez and F. Thomson*, Rebels-Turned-Narcos? The FARC-EP's Political Involvement in Colombia's Cocaine Economy,* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Vol. 44, Issue 1, June 2020, pp. 26-51.
[932] J. Otis, p. 2.
[933] *Las FARC se Fortalecen como Cartel del Narcotráfico, Revela Informe de la Policía*, Caracol Radio, Febuary 18, 2010.
[934] Ibid. See also: *Drug Trafficking: The Role of Insurgents, Terrorists, and Sovereign States*, Unites States Directorate of Intelligence, Copy 365, November 1982 (Declassified January 2011), pp.1-13.
[935] S. Logan and A. Morse, pp. 12-15.
[936] *ARC Preparan Campamento Bolivariano en Europa: lo estaría Organizado Rodrigo Granda*, El Tiempo, January 31, 2010.
[937] R. Graham, p. 1.
[938] These were the 15th *front*, 29th *front*, 30th *fron*t, 33rd *front*, 48th *front,* 57th *Front,* 60th *front* and 63rd *front*. See International Crisis Group Report (2010), p. 8.
[939] R. Vargas Meza, p. 1.

then-Colonel Luis Herlindo Mendieta in 2008.[940] The FARC nevertheless announced that it would give up the practice in 2012 in order to meet a precondition set by the government in the lead-up to peace talks (along with the release of hostages).[941] In the 1990s, the group also ventured into illegal gold mining, securing a presence amongst the mining communities of Bajo Cauca and North Eastern Antioquia.[942] This activity was continued by dissident FARC elements and other armed groups following the 2016 peace deal, with cross-border smuggling activities reportedly sanctioned by elements of Venezuela's Maduro regime.[943]

Transport and logistics

Despite evolving over time, the FARC's transport and logistics systems remained relatively simple in comparison to other contemporary clandestine movements – a possible reflection of both its long rural history and grassroots character. Even then, it did establish cross-border transport and smuggling solutions and routes, both within the context of its criminal activities and for the purposes of acquiring weapons and other offensive capabilities. The group developed its own network of roads and bridges in borderland areas, which benefited from cover provided by dense forests along the Peruvian, Ecuadorian and Panamanian borders, whilst also exploiting swamps and rivers bordering Venezuela and Brazil.[944] Again, transport infrastructure provided the dual benefit of contributing to shadow governance ambitions, whilst at the same time providing a trafficking and logistics function. Illustratively, the group instructed drivers and bribed Ecuadorian soldiers and policemen to smuggle propane cannisters – used to manufacture mortar rounds – as well as medical supplies, fuel and even Russian-made PRG 7V anti-tank rockets into Colombia.[945] Panama's Darien region, meanwhile, provided a hub for arms, ammunition and detonators acquired from criminal groups (possibly with the complicity of corrupt elements of the National Army), which were subsequently transported by the group's 57th *front* to Colombia, further supplementing FARC weapons caches.[946]

The group employed creative smuggling solutions as part of its maritime trafficking operations, perhaps best illustrated by its use of so-called 'narco-submarines' aimed at reducing the risk of interdiction. Rudimentary at first, these semi-submersible vessels evolved in both range – up to 2,000 nautical miles – and sophistication from around 2005 onwards, adopting aerodynamic and double-hulled designs, multiple fuel tanks and advanced telecommunication equipment, anti-radar and Global Positioning System (GPS) technology.[947] The vessels would typically rendezvous with smaller go-fast boats which, following the transhipment of drug

[940] *Guerra total de las FARC, un capitulo de horror en el conflicto armado*, El Tiempo, September 26, 2016, https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-16712059.
[941] *FARC Renounces Kidnapping*, Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas, February 28, 2012, https://www.wola.org/analysis/farc-renounces-kidnapping/.
[942] *Due Diligence in Colombia's Gold Supply Chain: Gold Mining in Antioquia*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2016, p. 9.
[943] R. C. Berg et al., *A Closer Look at Colombia's Illegal, Artisanal, and Small-Scale Mining*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), December 20, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/closer-look-colombias-illegal-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining.
[944] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p.1 0
[945] See S. Logan and A. Morse, p. 9; and R. Florey, *Colombia military seizes anti-aircraft rockets 'meant for FARC'*, Colombia Reports, February 4, 2015, https://colombiareports.com/colombia-military-seizes-anti-aircraft-rockets-meant-farc/amp/.
[946] See *FARC Associate Pleads Guilty in Manhattan Federal Court to Providing Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organisation*, US Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, (212) 637-2600, August 10, 2010, https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2010/nyfo081010.htm; and A. Alsema, *Military Intelligence Shed Light on Colombia's Illegal Arms Import*s, Colombia Reports, November 1, 2023, https://colombiareports.com/military-intelligence-sheds-light-on-colombias-illegal-arms-imports/.
[947] M. J. Jaramillo, *The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Development of Narco-Submarines*, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 2016, p. 54.

loads, would carry these consignments to discreet coastal disembarkation points for onward distribution. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Colombian National Police concluded that the FARC employed graduate engineers as part of its submarine development programme, whilst also drawing on the expertise of Sri Lankan, Russian and Pakistani naval engineers.[948] In an interesting business spin-off venture, the FARC was reported to have sold and/or rented part of its semi-submersible capability, the construction of which required bespoke factory sites hidden under jungle canopy and skills as diverse as steel welding, electrical circuit-laying and fiberglass work as well as knowledge of propulsion systems, to other trafficking groups – the latter of whom may also have contributed to capability development costs.[949]

Once again, relationships with both state actors and other clandestine groups proved instrumental in establishing a regional logistics footprint, contributing to power projection and influence. For example, the FARC courted Brazilian trafficker Luiz Fernando da Costa (aka Fernandinho Beira-Mar) as a means of accessing wider distribution networks by leveraging his contacts in Paraguay.[950] It also reportedly worked with the Paraguayan Popular Army (EPP) guerilla movement to establish a logistics presence in the Triple Frontier region connecting Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.[951] Meanwhile, emails attributed to FARC leader Raúl Reyes revealed that the group was introduced to Australian arms dealers with access to surface-to-air missile parts by Hugo Chavez.[952] Venezuela also reportedly provided elements of the FARC with Venezuelan passports for the purpose of travelling to Germany.[953] Colombian intelligence officials, furthermore, highlighted that the group's attempts at establishing business and distribution contacts extended across the Atlantic, including to Brussels, Amsterdam and Paris.[954]

Finance and money laundering

Like many other clandestine organisations, financial income became a key contributor to the FARC's longevity – a means through which to recruit members and retain its combat strength. However, and as highlighted throughout this chapter, financial profit arguably became an end in itself, distorting the group's original aims and introducing complex political economy dynamics.[955] Indeed, Colombian estimates placed the organisation's annual revenue for 1998 at around US $285 million,[956] with some estimations suggesting that this may have risen to as much as US $600 million in the early 2000s.[957] The FARC leadership's decision to participate in the drug trade initially consisted of a ten percent protection tax levied on coca cultivators and smugglers, paving the way for more direct involvement via processing activities that

[948] A. M. Saavedra, *La tecnologia de los submarinos al servicio del narcotráfico*, El Pais, March 6, 2011, https://www.elpais.com.co/judicial/la-tecnologia-de-los-submarinos-al-servicio-del-narcotrafico.html. See also: G. A. Ackerman, *Comparative Analysis of VNSA Complex Engineering Efforts*, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 2016, p. 125.
[949] K. Semple, *The Submarine Next Door*, The New York Times Magazine, December 3, 2000, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20001203mag-semple.html?scp=13&sq=ismael%2520serrano&st=cse; and M. J. Jaramillo, p.58.
[950] J. P. Forero, *Globalization and the FARC*, United States Army War College Report, March 2013, pp. 19-20.
[951] Ibid.
[952] J. Glüsing, p. 1.
[953] Ibid.
[954] ICG (2010), p. 6.
[955] See for example: A. Rettberg *et al*., *Different Resources, Different Conflicts? The Subnational Political Economy of Armed Conflict and Crime in Colombia*, Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Colombia, 2020, pp. 3-44.
[956] R. Ortiz, I*nsurgent Strategies in the Post-Cold War: The Case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Vol. 25, Issue 2, January 2011, p. 129.
[957] K. Cragin and B. Hoffman, p. 5.

produced higher financial yields. Taxes also extended beyond the coca trade to include marijuana and poppy growers and were, as we have seen, further bolstered by income from kidnap-for-ransom and illegal mining activities.[958] These sources of income were also likely supplemented by donations from state backers. For example, emails attributed to the FARC's leadership revealed how Hugo Chávez offered the FARC up to US $300m alongside oil rations that could subsequently be sold for profit.[959] In turn, observers have recurrently pointed to the extent to which systemised access to and control over illicit revenue streams contributed to the organisation's status as one of the world's wealthiest insurgencies.[960]

Organisationally, many of the key decisions relating to the group's financial operations were taken by its Financial Commission, which was established following the FARC's Seventh Guerilla Conference in 1982 (during which the group elected to turn to the coca trade for revenue).[961] Subsequently, Olidem Romel Solarte Cerón (Aka 'Oliver'), Chief Financial Officer of the 48th *Front*, appeared to have played a significant role in establishing new financial relations and cross-border trafficking partnerships, including with Ecuadorian and Mexican wholesale cocaine distributors, before his death in 2011.[962] The group also harnessed a range of money laundering, investment and financial transfer schemes. Already in the 1970s, it exploited a foreign exchange system introduced by the Colombian Government known as '*ventanilla siniestra*' (or left-hand window), which allowed various actors – including the FARC – to inject US dollars into mainstream financial institutions as well as effectively sell dollars to the Government.[963]

After the closure of the system in 1991, narcotics traffickers, including FARC partners, turned to the Black-Market Peso Exchange (BMPE), in which narco-representatives sold US dollars – such as those generated by drug sales in the US – to peso brokers at discounted rates. Rather than smuggling cash to Colombia, the dollars were placed in a bank account in the US and subsequently used by brokers to buy various trade export goods (such as machinery, electronics and so on) purchased by Colombian businesses.[964] It is also likely that, in a similar vein to wider trafficking organisations in Latin America, the FARC leveraged the region's network of '*casas de cambios*' (exchange houses) benefiting from correspondent banking arrangements with foreign banks. For example, in 2008, the US Treasury designated one such Bogota-headquartered exchange house, Mercurio Internacional S.A, for providing money laundering services to the FARC's 27th *front*. According to the designation, the exchange house worked with a number of other similar entities to obscure foreign currency exchange activities and avoid financial detection by regulators.[965]

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[958] J C. A. Youngers and E Rosin*, Drugs and Democracy in Latin America,* Boulder (CO): Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005, p. 103.
[959] *The Farc files: Just how much help has Hugo Chávez given to Colombia's guerillas?* The Economist, May 22, 2008, https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2008/05/22/the-farc-files.
[960] See for example A. R. Suárez, *Parasites and Predators: Guerrillas and the Insurrection Economy of Colombia*, Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 53, No. 2, Spring 2000, pp. 577-601.
[961] T. R. Cook, *The Financial Arm of the FARC: A Threat Finance Perspective*, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol.1, No.4, Spring 2011, p.22
[962] *Solarte era el contacto con narcos mexicanos*, El Universo, March 17, 2011, https://www.eluniverso.com/2011/03/17/1/1355/solarte-era-contacto-narcos-mexicanos.html/.
[963] See A. L. Atehortúa Cruz and D. M. Rojas Rivera, *El narcotráfico en Colombia. Pioneros y capos*, Historia y Espacio, Vol. 4, No. 31, January 2008, p. 7.
[964] T. R. Cook, p. 30.
[965] *Treasury Targets FARC money Exchange House*, US Treasury Press Release, May 7, 2008, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/hp966.

8.5 Bringing it together:

As this chapter has shown, the academic value of examining the FARC lies partly in the organisation's unusual longevity (by guerilla group standards) and partly in its hybrid, political-criminal character. Born within the wider geostrategic context of the Cold War and proliferation of Marxist insurgencies, the organisation had to navigate change, both within Colombian politics and the wider region, when the collapse of the Soviet Union gave way to globalisation, market economics and social change. The FARC was perhaps always going to evolve and morph, if only to survive. What is perhaps most striking is the way in which it did so. On the one hand, it attempted to retain its ideological appeal amongst elements of the population that remained largely in the margins of this systemic change. This also extended to state patrons, as seen in the context of its relations with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. On the other, it not only adapted to but also leveraged globalisation, including transnational narcotics supply chains, as part of its operating model. That it was able to maintain these concurrent, and to a significant extent, competing lines of effort is striking. Perhaps inevitably however, this approach also shifted internal incentive structures from the collective to the individual, with *front* commanders arguably taking on the mantel of local quasi-drug kingpins – a dynamic which, as Thomas A. Marks notes, meant that the group's ways and means gradually subsumed its aims.[966] Confronted with the reality that it could not realistically succeed in its armed campaign as well as dwindling popular support, the organisation's leadership had little choice but to pursue the route of political dialogue and demobilisation, even if small dissident – and largely criminal – elements refused to lay down their arms.

In turn, the case study is directly relevant to this thesis' core research question in a number of aspects. Firstly, it provides yet another example of how clandestine non-state actors can act as agents of political change. Indeed, at its pinnacle the group came close to supplanting the state in key localities within its 'home' territories, while inflicting military losses on government forces. The case study therefore also supports the notion introduced in Chapter 2 that non-state actors are capable of both wielding significant power and of 'chipping away' at the state's natural defences. Meanwhile, the FARC's approach to decision and strategy-making, including through conferences and internal resolutions, reveals an advanced policy apparatus (hypothesis 1) tied to accompanying organisational implementation mechanisms as well as external partnerships. Although the FARC in its early years maintained a relatively hierarchical structure, it was compelled to devolve some executive powers to lower-order formations, including *fronts*, as an antidote against disruption (a dynamic that lies at the heart of this thesis' second hypothesis). Of course, this same delegation of power also arguably undermined some of the group's cohesion as a unified political force, particularly when local commanders began to pursue their own localised economic interests. Finally, and of direct relevance to this thesis' third hypothesis is the range of levers adopted by the group over the years, to include advanced capabilities such as narco-submarines and light aircraft in addition to its soldiers. As such, the organisation came close to conceptually resembling a 'state within a state' with its own land, sea and air forces. It is in turn possible that this may offer a template for future clandestine organisations seeking to establish similar multi-domain capabilities in the age of the drone (in Yemen for example).[967] Finally, the FARC's hybrid, narco-insurgent character reintroduces some of the definitional challenges introduced in Chapter 1, underscoring how clandestine organisations may evolve in ways that do not fit neatly within rigid typologies. In this respect, the thesis' framework was shown to provide a more effective and agile means of mapping groups whose policies, strategies and levers of power extend across traditional definitional boundaries.

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[966] See T. A. Marks, *FARC, 1982-2002: criminal foundation for insurgent defeat*, in T. A. Marks and P. B. Rich (eds), *People's War: Variants and Responses (1st Edition)*, London: Routledge, 2017.

[967] These have been used within the maritime, air and land domains by Ukrainian forces, introducing the potential for the capability to migrate to non-state actors.