

Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC)

MetMUNC XLVIII

Topic: Narcoterrorism in Latin America

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Narcoterrorism and Its Origins

Narcoterrorism refers to (1) the logistics of drug trafficking, (2) the use of drug trafficking to finance terrorist organizations, or (3) the use of violence by drug trafficking organizations to force political concessions. The term was first used by former President Fernando Belaúnde Terry of Peru in 1983 to describe terrorist-type attacks against the country's anti-narcotics police. Later, the term would be popularized when it was used to describe the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 in the United States. Soon, the meaning of the narcoterrorism would refer not only to the terrorist attacks against anti-drug policies but also to the relationship between drug trafficking and terrorism as a whole.

This attempt to combine both drug



Figure 1. The area shaded in brown illustrates the Latin American and the Caribbeans countries.

trafficking and terrorism into one concept has given the word “narcoterrorism,” a very loose definition.¹

Narcoterrorism in Latin America

So how does this seemingly ill-defined term apply to Latin America? Well, the answer should be clear when the activities in the region's countries are considered. The sheer size and number of infamous drug cartels from Latin America marks it as a primary avenue for drug trafficking. And its location near the US, notably the world's biggest consumer of drugs such as cocaine, further reinforces this role.² Therefore, it is unsurprising that the United States counternarcotics policies frequently feature Latin America and the Caribbean, which are distinguished as major sources of illicit drugs and natural hotspots of narcoterrorism.

Consequences of Narcoterrorism

But why is this a problem? Basically, narcoterrorism is destructive. It decays the infrastructure of every province, state, or locale it touches; it atrophies citizen security and economic development; and it results in serious outbreaks of drug-related violence and homicide. These conflicts strain Latin American governments, who already suffer from overtaxed criminal justice systems, corruption, and overwhelmed law enforcement. As a result, a dangerous cycle forms, strengthening drug trafficking organizations and crime syndicates. Gradually, government influence in affected areas weakens as high crime rates and poverty force citizens to buy and sell drugs to make ends meet.³

¹ <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/Demistifying%20narcoterrorism%20FINAL.pdf>

² <https://journals.openedition.org/spp/1010>

³ https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R43882.html#_Toc47327877

Specific Case Studies of Narcoterrorism in Latin America

The threat posed by narco-terrorism cannot be ignored. The problem presents itself in many Latin American countries, with varying degrees of severity. In Colombia, the guerilla group known as the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (better known as FARC) have become known for their radical

ideologies, forced conscriptions, and their involvement in the illicit drug trade. Since the 1990s, Colombia has been a major producer of cocaine⁴. Groups like the FARC sustain themselves financially by levying “taxes” on the drug trafficking network. FARC operations in Colombia

draw parallels to narcoterrorist groups in the Tri-Border Area (located on the lines that touch Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil; *Figure 2*). The region is packed with notorious narcotics traffickers who run the region on bribes and government

corruption.⁵ As a result, narco-terrorist groups in the area tend to challenge governments on

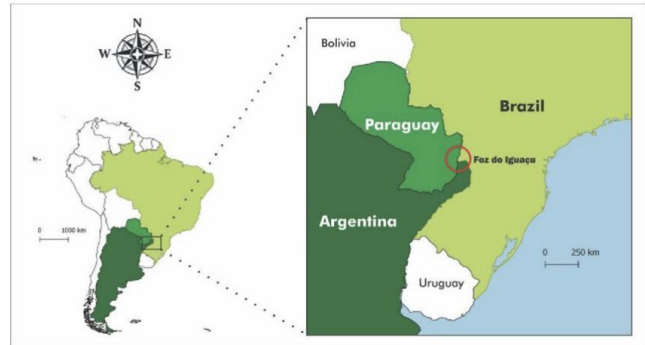


Figure 2. This illustrates the Tri-border Area which includes the nations of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil.



Figure 3. This scene depicts the guerilla troops of the FARC, numbered at over 20,000 at the height of its power.

4 <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315624099/chapters/10.4324/9781315624099-9>

5 https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/10275/doc_10305_290_en.pdf

anti-narcotics policies that would reduce their drug money- forcing political concessions in often violent ways.⁶ Further problems arise when transnational connections between these organizations are considered. Al-Qaeda affiliates in Mexico for instance, provide potential evidence of cooperation between Latin American drug cartels and Islamic terrorist groups.⁷ Another instance is present in the Tri-Border Area, where Islamic extremist groups such as Hezbollah have swarmed due to its uncontrolled environment and economy- run on narcotics trafficking and other illegal activities.⁸

The Failures of Plan Colombia

Because the problem is so complex, policymakers have had trouble addressing the issue. Plan Colombia, for instance, was a misguided attempt that ended in failure. The plan was created in 1999 by Columbian President Andrés Pastrana and U.S. President Bill Clinton. In 2000, the US began funding Plan Columbia in order to combat Columbian drug cartels and left-wing insurgent groups in Columbia. The goal of the plan was to combat Colombia's cocaine crisis by eradicating coca crops and arresting problematic drug traffickers.⁹ Policymakers assumed that Colombia's cocaine market could be halted by targeting the source and the supplier of the drug, but the reality wasn't so open and shut. For starters, attempts to eradicate coca cultivation through brute force proved ineffective. The US invested in planes that sprayed a crop-killing formula which dumped these chemicals at La Balsa, a center of coca production. However, these attempts did not stop farmers from growing coca and in fact, ended up destroying other legal crops such as cassava, sugar cane, and plantains in the process. As a result, Balsa farmers picked

6 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36605769>

7 https://www.usmceu.edu/Portals/218/CAOCL/files/18Jun_Moeykens_Justin.pdf?ver=2019-04-17-133149-740

8 <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jml/art/iran-and-hezbollah-in-the-tri-border-areas-of-latin-america-a-look-at-the-%E2%80%9Ccold-tba%E2%80%9D-and-the>

9 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35491504>

up the dead coca seeds, which were by far their most profitable crop, and replanted them in fields where the legal crops once grew. Another failure falls on the shoulders of America military forces sent as a part of the program, who just barely fend off FARC paramilitary forces. Territorial conflicts often result in vicious crossfire. Paramilitaries kill villagers who are mistaken to be US informants. And worse of all, villagers don't want to stop growing coca. As Edgar Rosario, a long time coca farmer explains "We would like to plant fruit, but there has to be a company to buy it". The problem therefore does not lie in the actual growth of coca plants, but the lack of incentive to grow something else. The destabilizing effects of the illicit drug trade have caused ongoing struggles in Latin American nations. As a result, Latin American leaders and others have begun to search for drug policy alternatives in order to mend the disrupted situation. Some consider education- in hopes of providing employment opportunities outside of the coca fields- and improved infrastructure and transportation- in hopes of encouraging growth of legal crops- as viable solutions.¹⁰

The Difficulties in Solving Narcoterrorism and Past Policy

Because of poor policy, narcoterrorism still remains unabating. Factors such as weak border security, lack of resources, and increasing demands for drugs complicate the issue and stymie positive change. Plan Colombia was a failure at eradicating the source of the drugs. But another past initiative had successfully reduced the market for these drugs. In the 1980s, the US saw a sharp decline in drug usage with a combination of education, prevention, and treatment programs as well as stronger enforcement of drug laws. Taken as a victory, the general population no longer saw drug abuse as a problem- and that was a big mistake. Because soon, the

¹⁰ <https://prospect.org/article/failure-plan-colombia/>

demand for drugs would skyrocket. And the drug trafficking network, complexified and strengthened by the involvement of narco-terrorist groups, would grow to be a bigger beast than the US could handle by the 1990s. So, with the advent of 9-11, the sentiments of the war on drugs and the war on terror became merged.¹¹ This meant that anti-narcotics policy in Latin America focused on funneling ludicrous amounts of money on militaries, border security, and all sorts of displays of force. But even with 75 US security assistance programs and billions of anti-narcotics policy funding, Latin America has seen no substantial decrease in drug production. Furthermore, the actions of US-aid groups throughout the past several decades have been shown to brush against human rights violations. From teaching torture techniques to killing thousands of civilians to pad body counts, US-aid has had its share of road bumps. Clearly, these initiatives are not working.¹²

It is not simply enough to throw money and resources at the problem- exemplified by decades of US policy. This is a conflict where seemingly obvious solutions tend to fail. Therefore, the issue must be addressed through more nuanced and novel methods. A resolution on this complex issue must account for both the past and current situation in Latin America, the factors that fuel narcoterrorism, and acknowledge the mistakes made by previous policies.

¹¹ <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1522&context=cilj>

¹² <https://www.wola.org/analysis/u-s-military-assistance-latin-america/>

Questions to Consider:

1. To what extent is your country affected by narcoterrorism?
2. What initiatives are being taken to tackle narcoterrorism in your country?
3. Does your country house any narco trafficking terrorist organizations?
4. Is your country a source or destination for illicit drugs?
5. How was your country affected by the US war on drugs?
6. How has your country responded to the drug crisis?

Helpful Links:

- <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/Demistifying%20narcoterrorism%20FINAL.pdf>
- <https://warontherocks.com/2018/12/the-enduring-legacy-of-reagans-drug-war-in-latin-america/>
- https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R43882.html#_Toc473278775
- <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/drogue-terreur.pdf>
- <https://journals.openedition.org/spp/1010>
- <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1522&context=cilj>