

Imperatives of the Colombian drug war

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The protesters who marched on Washington, last month voiced the belief that American current involvement in Colombia's civil war is a continuation of U.S. "imperialism" from the 1980s.

But the trouble in Colombia today is not comparable to the problems of Latin America of the '80s. Colombia is not only a national security issue but also a health and safety issue. In Washington, New York City, Los Angeles and Baltimore, heroin and cocaine were responsible for the combined deaths of 2,461 people in the year 2000.

Asa Hutchinson, administrator of the Drug and Enforcement Agency, recently said, "The drug supply undermines families and erodes democracies." He knows that 90 percent of the cocaine and 75 percent of the heroin used in these deaths came from Colombia.

The money from the sale of narcotics funds narco-guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and extragovernmental paramilitaries. These renegade groups have been fighting the Colombian government in a 40-year civil war that threatens the Latin America's oldest democracy.

"Narcoizing" Colombia could bring similar fates to neighboring Panama and Venezuela through a domino effect. It would be, among other things, an economic nightmare if the Panama Canal and approximately 23 percent of Americas' total imported oil from the Andean region fell into these narco-terrorist hands.

It is recognized that Colombia's problems did not receive adequate attention during the Clinton administration. U.S. policies on Colombia were tainted by efforts to bifurcate the relationship between drug traffickers and guerrillas. This was done because ignoring the hard problems was easier than doing something about them.

However, if nothing is done about Colombian narco-terrorism now, the guerrillas will succeed and add unwarranted credibility and further economic muscle to their ugly activities.

One option for the Bush "43" administration is to continue with the Clinton legacy and pay Colombia lip service while the narco-guerrillas take over.

President Bush may be able to ignore Colombia for one term, but eventually the problems will be unavoidable. America may be so far behind the power curve that access to Colombian oil, agri-products and other resources will require appeasement of a Colombian narco-state.

A signal that the administration may be prepared to get tough with narco-guerrillas came last Tuesday when a federal grand jury in Washington indicted the FARC organization and six of its members on murder and other charges.

An alternative option is to focus on reducing the demand for drugs domestically. Some may believe we can avoid getting involved in Colombia if drug-related deaths are reduced through drug treatment. A problem with this option is that while drug treatment saves lives, an increase in the volume of drugs entering the U.S. ultimately will result in more drug deaths. By ignoring the supply side, we prevent traction on the demand side of the problem.

Another option is to simply militarize our war on drugs. America can give the Colombian government all the resources it needs to suppress the guerrilla and paramilitary forces. This one-dimensional approach is fundamentally flawed because it does not acknowledge the problems related to economic and sociopolitical factors that ignited the imbroglio 40 years ago. The war on drugs cannot be fought only on the demand side, on the supply side or only through military strategies. It is a multidimensional conflict, and must be fought accordingly.

If the Bush administration fails to realize that Colombia poses not merely a security problem, the U.S. may find itself in a protracted conflict, similar to Vietnam.

To be successful, the U.S. must help the Colombians fight a two-front war against the guerrillas and other extra-governmental factions.

On the first front, crop eradication must be used to kill the poppy and coca plants that are the lifeblood resource of the guerrillas. Effective crop eradication would eliminate a large portion of the errant groups' \$100 million a month-plus budget. As they lose money, the frequency and lethality of their operations would go down because they will not have the resources to maintain their current tempo of attacks. This must not be done without microeconomic development and crop replacement. Failure to do so will force many farmers into unemployment and into the recruiting orbit of the guerrillas.

The second front must be an armed and trained community defense force (CDF) focused on denying guerrillas access to their safe areas. CDFs will also protect Colombians from being forced into service by the FARC and ELN and intimidation by paramilitaries. Preventing these elements from recruiting new members will further weaken them because they will be unable to replenish their combat losses. In order for the CDFs to be a capable fighting force, they need customized conditional aid from the U.S. that is effective in thwarting the illegal groups.

This aid, in conjunction with crop eradication, crop replacement and microeconomic development will enervate the narco-guerrillas and paramilitaries to the point at which they can no longer win on the battlefield. Once they realize victory is impossible, they may stop fighting and come to the negotiation table, as occurred in El Salvador in 1990-91. This will push them into an even more democratic government.

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