GLOBAL POLITICS NETWORK

The role of the state in the international illicit drugs trade: the case of Colombia and external intervention

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War was a milestone in international relations. After four decades of strained, highly-armed bipolarity and several occasions when the world was on the brink of another World War, many assumed there was now an opportunity to establish a 'New World Order' characterised by liberty, democracy and capitalism. What emerged instead was a world with increased instability and uncertainty, given the lack of the overarching security framework that the Cold War had provided. While the physical security of most advanced industrialised states is probably higher than before, the international system has seen the emergence of a range of new concerns and issues which have been subsumed in the so-called 'new security agenda'. This agenda includes the international politics of the environment, human rights, intervention, refugees and transnational organized crime (TOC), which encompasses terrorism, money laundering and trafficking of people, goods, weapons, nuclear material and illegal drugs (Brown 1997: 228). While transnational forces have always been a feature of international relations, and ideas and crime have always crossed borders – consider

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for example the role the Catholic Church or the pirates of Barbary played in international relations - by all accounts transnational organized crime is on the rise. While facilitated by the new international environment, this is largely due to an increased internationalisation in the social, technological, political and economic spheres, a phenomenon generally referred to as 'globalization'. According to some, TOC has become the greatest threat in the 1990s, while at the same time state autonomy has gradually been reduced (Strange 1996: 121). The fact that many states signed the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* in December 2000 reflects this understanding and the desire for concerted action on the international level (United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention 2000: 1).

In many ways the international trade in illicit drugs has been the greatest beneficiary of this new situation and has grown immensely. It is estimated that the production of coca leaf and opium doubled in the period 1985-1997 (Institute for National Strategic Studies: 4). The main reason for concern on the international level is the size of the profit made from drug trafficking and sales in rich industrialised countries. Perhaps more worryingly, in the new security environment of the post-Cold War period, these profits have often been used to fund terrorism and insurgency, while systematically undermining and corrupting the producer countries.

This essay will focus on the role of the state in the international illegal drugs trade. Colombia has long been the world's largest producer and exporter of cocaine, one of the world's most profitable commodities. For the purpose of this essay, the state will be defined in a 'national-territorial' sense, ie as the totality of institutions, people and functions within its geographical borders and space (Halliday 1994: 78). While it is the government of Colombia that is fighting the war on drugs, other factions in Colombia involved in the drugs trade will also be examined. It will be shown that they are all, in one way or another, implicated in the drugs industry, and that taken together, they represent what has been termed a 'war system', a complex, self-perpetuating, violent vicious circle that resists all attempts at resolution (Richani 1997). The effect of this has been to criminalize Colombia to the extent that it may be called a 'failed state' (Politi 1997: 15; Marcella & Schulz 1999: 213). This leads one to ask: Who or what is the state in Colombia? This raises questions about the current definition of the 'state' as used in mainstream International Relations theory and therefore how it could be better conceptualised in relation to the 'new security agenda'.

Given the lack of a global system of enforcement to control the effects of transnational organized crime, the 1990s have seen the emergence of an increased willingness of some states to intervene in the internal affairs of others, be this for moral, strategic, humanitarian or economic reasons (Perl 1994: 6). With a very high incidence of illegal drug use, the United States seemed to be facing what it perceived as a 'drug epidemic' in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus President Reagan first declared a 'war on drugs' in 1982 (Chepesiuk 1999: 32) and took this war abroad in an attempt to reduce the ever-growing supply, largely from Latin America. The US continue to intervene in Colombia as part of its strategy of fighting a 'war on drugs', and have recently escalated the war under the aegis of *Plan Colombia*. This essay will argue that such intervention only exacerbates the situation in Colombia, leading to the US becoming part of the war system, and thus indirectly implicated in the international drugs trade.

Lastly, this essay will show that the rise of the international drugs trade is ultimately a result of what may be termed the 'globalization of organized crime' (Mittelman & Johnston 1999). A state mired by civil war such as Colombia is undermined to the extent that it becomes a 'failed state'. Thus the role of the state in the international drugs trade in the case of Colombia is one of being a 'courtesan state', which is one that serves 'the interests embodied in neoliberal globalization' (Mittelman & Johnston 1999: 104). This has led the same authors to speak of a triad of 'the globalization of organized crime, the rise of the courtesan state, and the corruption of civil society' (Mittelman & Johnston 1999: 123).

The globalization of the international illicit drugs trade: a new and great threat?

The international trade in illicit drugs[2] is a global economic phenomenon that is primarily noted for its size and tenacity, even in the face of strenuous efforts to contain it or repress it. Currently its turnover stands at around US$ 500 billion a year, putting it on the same level as oil and other major trading commodities (Williams 1994a: 99). This can partly be explained by its illegality, which also accounts for the high levels of corruption and violence surrounding it. In particular however, there are two major factors that have facilitated the growth of transnational organized crime in general,

[2] Which for simplicity's sake will be referred to here generally as the *international drugs trade*.

and the international drugs trade in particular: the end of the Cold War and a general trend towards globalization.

The end of the Cold War has meant the tearing down of boundaries, be these political, social or economic. Initially at least, security was relaxed, the all-dominating, overarching military competition between two global superpowers suddenly was no more. The vast regions of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were opened up to market capitalism and in most cases various forms of participative politics. Drug traffickers were presented with new possibilities. For example, during and following the war and turmoil that engulfed the Balkans in the 1990s, that area was opened up as a major trafficking route. In other areas, insurgent, guerrilla and terrorist groups that had previously been supported by one or other of the superpowers for Cold War strategic reasons, found themselves suddenly ostracized, and turned to drugs trafficking to fund their activities (e.g. the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan, the PKK in Kurdistan). In some cases, following the loss of their ideology and ideological backers, such groups simply gave up their ideology and became criminal enterprises.

The end of the Cold War has been paralleled by globalization (the increased internationalisation of the economies, societies and polities of this world, driven by technological and political-economic change), which is arguably one of the most influential phenomena of our times (Beck 2000: 1). It has had a similar catalytic effect on transnational organized crime and specifically the international drugs trade. Technology and telecommunications have made huge leaps, enabling people, goods and information to move around the globe far more rapidly. The level of global trade, capital and people flows has increased hugely in the last decade or more, at the same time as widespread financial deregulation has been encouraged. Overall, markets have become more integrated. Indeed some large regions have become free trade areas – notably the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) – which has again brought down borders and made trade and illegal trafficking easier.

While these two major developments have facilitated the growth and scope of legitimate multi-national corporations (MNCs), they have had a similar effect on transnational organized crime groups (Cilluffo 1999a: 10; Shelley 1995: 465). Analysed as significant economic actors both groups may be said to have identical aims and modes of operating, namely profit maximisation with risk minimisation, as well as rational decision-making, product innovation and research and development

(Mittelman & Johnston 1999: 112). In addition however, unlike legitimate profit-making enterprises, transnational organized crime has what has been referred to as 'the Edge' over its legal counterparts, in other words the ability to use illegal means towards its ends (Lupsha 1996: 35). These advantages are the ability to bribe and corrupt, the ability to use violence as an instrument, huge organisational flexibility because of the lack of any legal, moral, bureaucratic restrictions on decision-making and actions, the ability to sack, drop, even kill off any useless or unprofitable aspects of its organisations, and lastly complete secrecy in which to shroud its actions. Besides the domestic problems caused by the international drugs trade, what are the effects of transnational organized crime in terms of the post-Cold War 'new security agenda'?

Firstly, one must look at the huge profits generated by the international drugs trade. Internationally, these are similar to the profits generated by the trade in any other major global commodity such as oil. Like legal capital flows, huge amounts of illegal drugs money transferred around the world can have stabilising and destabilising effects, and thus have a strategic-political dimension. But because of its illegal source, this money has to be laundered, is often reinvested in legitimate enterprises and real estate, and most significantly, is not under any form of governmental, let alone democratic control. On a national level, this money has immense power to corrupt and to undermine existing political, judicial and security systems and networks, threatening the impartiality and functioning of these institutions.
Secondly, and this is particularly poignant in the case study to be examined below, the money generated by crime is often a cause of violence. Greed and the ability to make a lot of money in poor countries generally lead to social decay and a higher willingness to use violence to achieve ends. This is particularly true in the drugs business environment, where the profits to be made are so high and the risk often relatively low. Over time this can create a culture of violence. Colombia is a prime example of such a culture. It is no coincidence that it is one of the most violent countries in the world with one of the highest homicide and kidnapping rates. In 1998 the murder rate per 100,000 people in Colombia stood at around 56, compared to 20 in Russia and around 6.5 in the United States, while in the same year nearly 3,000 people were kidnapped (Economist Survey 2001: 4).

Thirdly, transnational organized crime groups often have links, direct or indirect, to illegitimate non-state violence, ie insurgencies, terrorists and the like. Such groups may just be labour hired to do the dirtiest deeds - it may be politically necessary or convenient for the drugs lords to pay off or buy the support of these groups - or such

groups may themselves dabble in drug trafficking to fund their activities. Illegal drugs are by no means the only commodity used in this way; it is worth pointing out the similar function of diamonds and oil in many insurgencies and civil wars fought out in West Africa in particular, but also in the Great Lakes region and in Central Asia.

Lastly, drugs groups may form strategic alliances with other transnational organized crime groups. Similar to other multi-national corporations, they open up new markets and distribution networks, spread their activities and resources over a wider area, gain influence and become more competitive. There has been a strong focus on such alliances: arguably the fear of alleged connections between the Colombian drugs cartels, the Italian Mafia and Russian crime groups is one of the reasons transnational organized crime has increasingly begun to be perceived as a major new security threat (Williams 1994b; Shelley 1995).

For these reasons drugs have become one of the most significant items on the 'new security agenda' and in the 'New International Order' drafted by the Bush Senior administration in early 1991. A combination of the effects above has undermined and corrupted countries like Colombia, Sierra Leone and Somalia to such an extent that they may be termed 'failed' states (Politi 1997: 15; Marcella & Schulz 1999: 213). Arguably, transnational organized crime groups based in such states are the most powerful of all, as they thus have a secure power base from which to operate. A combination of national and international reasons has led the United States to fight a 'war on drugs', first at home, and later overseas. Starting with President Nixon in the early 1970s, but particularly since the Reagan and Bush Senior administrations, the United States has focused on reducing the supply of illegal drugs. This has led it to intervene in Latin America and elsewhere, which shall be examined below.

The case of Colombia: how it has become criminalized by the international drugs trade

Colombia is probably the world's most infamous producer and exporter of illegal drugs. This reputation is perhaps justified, given that it has become by far the world's largest producer and exporter of cocaine in recent years. Colombia's proximity to and domination of the US market understandably make it the focus of US attention and intervention. Moreover, it is by far the most troubled country in the Western hemisphere. As mentioned above, some 35,000 people have been victims of 'political'

killings in the last decade and it is trapped in a 'spiral of violence and corruption that makes "colombianization" a metaphor for a failing state' (Marcella & Schulz 1999: 213). Not only is Colombia suffering from the effects of the so-called "drugs cartels'" presence, it has also been fighting a low-intensity war against an insurgency by Marxist guerrillas for more than thirty years. The roots of this insurgency lie in the troubled period known as 'la Violencia', which lasted from 1948-58 and amounted to a civil war with some 200'000 deaths. Following this dark period, a National Unity government brought some stability to the country, but at the price of marginalizing many social forces.

Why Colombia?

Why has Colombia in particular become a synonym for drug-induced corruption, instability and violence? There have been many answers to this in the academic literature; it suffices to survey a few here.

Firstly, it is worth pointing out that Colombia's geostrategic situation is ideal, representing as it does a midway point between the foothills of the Andes, which is where coca has always been cultivated, and the US, the world's largest market for illegal drugs. Furthermore, Colombia is a large country with huge tracts of very thinly populated forest areas congenial to covert laboratory and processing activities, secret airstrips and warehousing facilities (MacDonald 1988: 28). Secondly, as mentioned above, Colombia has suffered from a history of corruption, violence, social marginalisation, a weak state and inefficient bureaucracy. The limitations on democracy in Colombia due to the extensive power the traditional elite has enjoyed have also been noted as a facilitating factor in the corruptibility of Colombia (Jordan 1999: 167). This has been referred to as 'clientelism' (Martz 1997). Castells notes an 'original combination of dormant networks of drug traffic linking up to the United States, an existing entrepreneurial class marginalized by the failed industrialization of Latin America, and the strong rooting of the relatively educated, upwardly mobile smugglers into their cultures and local societies. This serendipitous formula, however, built on a tradition, and took advantage of a very favourable institutional environment. The tradition was the violence that has characterized Colombia throughout its history, and particularly in the 1950s.' (Castells 1998: 205). These factors are conducive to the flourishing of the drugs industry.

The different factions in Colombia involved in the drugs trade

Given the pre-existence of violence, instability and corruption, what are the effects of the drugs industry on Colombia? How does all this manifest itself? To illustrate the effects on Colombia in detail, each one of the actors in this highly complicated situation must be examined, as well as their relationship to the drugs trade, its profits and the related violence.

The drugs 'cartels'

The people who produce and organize the export of the illegal drugs in Colombia are mostly organized in so-called 'cartels'. The use of this term is really a misnomer, as it implies a monopoly on the trade in one commodity; in actual fact there are many loose groups involved in drugs production and trafficking in Colombia of which none has a monopoly. Of these, the so-called *Medellin* and *Cali* groups have been the best known, largely because of the high profile of their leaders, quite a few of whom were arrested or killed in the early 1990s. The most famous of these 'kingpins' was probably Pablo Escobar from *Medellin*. There are many other groups and drug lords, and this is highlighted by the fact that the incarceration and death of people such as Escobar - who was shot by a special police squad in 1993 - has not spelled an end to the drugs business in Colombia. Even if one group is brought to its knees, another one emerges and takes over the lucrative business. For example, in the early 1990s, when the *Medellin* cartel was focused on and quite successfully attacked, the *Cali* cartel took over.

It used to be that Peru and Bolivia supplied most of the raw coca to processing plants in Colombia, from where the refined cocaine was then exported. Since the late 1980s however, partly due to successful crop eradication in Bolivia and the 'defeat' of the Maoist 'Sendero Luminoso' ('Shining Path') guerrilla in Peru, the whole production process, including the coca plantation, has largely been shifted to Colombia. This enables the drugs groups to control all aspects of the business, from growing to sale on the streets of North American cities and elsewhere. The groups themselves are highly organized, very much along the lines of legitimate enterprises, with a division of labour and specialists responsible for all aspects of the business. Much has been written on how some of the more powerful 'cartels' have successfully implemented

progressive business philosophies into their organisations, and successfully used high-tech information technology to develop very sophisticated communications, intelligence, counter-intelligence, money-laundering and money-tracking strategies, thus making them easily compete with some of the world's most powerful and developed multi-national corporations (Clawson & Lee 1996: 38).

The Colombian government

However, it would be wrong to paint a picture of a monolithic drugs business opposed by a morally intact, uncorrupted state and its administration. While Colombia is in many ways an advanced, established democracy, with a division of power and a developed bureaucracy, the power of the Colombian drugs barons - and the sheer size of their wealth - is such that corruption is endemic and omnipresent. Evidence has shown that vast parts of officialdom have been systematically undermined. Not only police, regional administrators, customs, port and anti-drug officials, but also members of Congress and the judiciary, army chiefs and ministers have been found guilty of corruption by drugs money. The extent to which this is true may be demonstrated by the findings of an ongoing investigation by the Colombian prosecutor general's office, which in 1996 found that drug money had reached the highest echelons of Colombia's political system. By early 1996, not only were attorney general Orlando Vasquez Velasquez and some twenty members of Congress, including the president of the Lower House of Congress Alvaro Benedetti, under formal investigation for alleged ties to drug traffickers, but President Ernesto Samper's erstwhile defense minister Fernando Botero was in jail, accused of accepting funds for the 1994 election campaign. Even President Ernesto Samper himself was formally charged in connection with the campaign affair, but was subsequently cleared (Clawson & Lee 1996: 170/171).

The Colombian armed forces

While in theory there are political checks in place to restrain the Colombian military and hold it to account, it has historically been quite independent and has played a limited political role. Unlike many other Latin American states, Colombia has rarely been ruled by a military dictatorship, the last exception being General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's regime, which lasted from 1953-57. The military has nevertheless held sway over many governments and governmental decisions. Until very recently for example, a high army official routinely headed the Defence Ministry. Historically, the Colombian

military has been linked to the endemic violence Colombia has suffered from, and it continues to be under scrutiny for its human rights abuses. Specifically, it is criticised for its links to right-wing self-defence paramilitaries, which continue to wreak the highest toll in terms of violence. Moreover, the armed forces' links to the paramilitaries, who often serve as their covert arm, but also function as private armies for the drug lords, implicate them in the drugs business even if they do not always directly benefit from the profits incurred. Indeed, the military has also been accused of direct involvement in the drugs trade, as it has often acted in tandem with the drug lords to further its anti-insurgency aims. The armed forces' main occupation continues to be the war against the guerrilla forces who - given the lack of military success against the insurgency - are deemed to be undermining its authority and honour. Thus the Colombian military often has different priorities from the Colombian government, who is currently following a strategy of negotiating with the different insurgent groups (BBC News Online 3 February 2001: '*Colombian President goes to rebel haven*').

The guerrillas

In the past four or five decades, due to political marginalisation and a failure to implement necessary land reform, several insurgent groups have arisen in Colombia. While their roots lay in the horrific violence that characterised the ten-year civil war known as *la Violencia* (1948-58), the frustration of continued marginalisation during the following National Unity government and inspiration gleaned from the successful 1959 Cuban revolution, led to the emergence in the early 1960s of several Marxist groups that proceeded to fight a guerrilla war against the Colombian state. Organized under the umbrella organisation 'Coordinadora Nacional Guerrillera' (CGN), the three main groups are the 'Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionaria Colombianas' (FARC), the 'Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional' (ELN) and the 'Ejercito Popular de Liberacion' (EPL), which together field some 20'000 guerrillas and 'exercise significant influence over 57% of the nation's 1071 municipalities'. Such is their power, that as a gesture in ongoing negotiations, President Pastrana agreed to their demand, and in 1999 ceded a territory of some 16'000 square miles to FARC, withdrawing all government forces and effectively creating a demilitarised zone where the guerrilla can act with impunity (Marcella & Schulz 2000: 8). Supposedly fighting on behalf of marginalized underclasses – which in Colombia mostly means peasants and the inhabitants of the slums of its large, sprawling cities – they claim to continue to strive for the overthrow of the existing political system and the establishment of a Marxist state and society. To

this end, they use the strategy of classic guerrilla warfare, launching hit-and-run attacks on governmental institutions and officials, while securing their hold on the distant rural areas where they enjoy substantial support of the inhabitants. To fund their activities, they also engage in arbitrary violence against the regular civilian population, using extortion, kidnapping, and the threat of murder to extract money. There is also substantial evidence of their partial participation in the drugs industry, usually through the means of 'taxation' of all stages of the lucrative drugs trade.

The Colombian government, fighting both counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency wars, but also outside governments, notably the US administration, find it conducive to their strategy and interests to highlight an alleged link between the guerrillas and the drugs industry, the so-called 'narco-guerrilla' nexus. Thus one finds writings claiming that the drug barons form alliances with the guerrillas, the former benefiting from territories and protection guaranteed by the guerrillas, the latter receiving its funding from the drug groups. More extreme, it is sometimes claimed that the drug barons and the guerrillas are effectively the same, or that the guerrillas actually have a hand in production and export of cocaine (BBC News Online 5 April 2001: '*Colombian general's "cartel" bombshell*'). To an extent this is true and there are many documented examples of cooperation between the two. But it is almost certainly an exaggeration, particularly given the highly different political ideologies and aims driving the two groups. While the drugs barons arguably need the framework of a functioning economy, and personally often strive for political and social respectability, acceptance and legitimacy, the guerrillas' declared aim continues to be the overthrow of the existing political order and the establishment of a Marxist state. Nevertheless, it has often been in their common interest to establish forms of cooperation, particularly in response to the actions of the other three main factions: the government, military and the paramilitaries. This nexus must therefore be seen as pure opportunism and not as generally characteristic of the functioning of the drugs industry in Colombia. There seems to be little evidence that the guerrillas themselves actually grow any coca or operate any of the refining laboratories. Given their links to the peasantry, on whose behalf they are nominally fighting, the guerrillas have no interest in exploiting and thus alienating their social base of support and power. However, it does seem to be well established that the guerrillas often 'tax' the various stages in the process of cocaine production and export, at least in the areas they control - which often are precisely the coca production areas. Besides kidnapping and ransoms, extortion and other crimes, this represents their main source of income.

The paramilitaries

Besides the afore-mentioned guerrillas, mainly on the left of the political spectrum, Colombia also abounds in right-wing militias, generally referred to as 'paramilitaries'. These arose out of civic self-defence groups created in the 1960s on the behest of the United States counter-insurgency specialists, who advocated that armed civilians work directly with the military (Marcella & Schulz 1999: 216). The paramilitary groups nominally see their task as one of defending themselves and their communities against the Marxist insurgency fought by the different guerrilla groups. They receive their legitimacy through constitutional provisions drafted in 1965 and 1968, which allow for their existence in law and for the army to furnish them with arms (Human Rights Watch 1990: 9).

Increasingly, the paramilitaries have served as private armies for large landowners and the drug lords and have become a political force in their own right. Today they number perhaps some 7,000 combatants and are organized in regional networks and loose federations, notably the 'United Self-Defense Units of Colombia' (AUC) under the leadership of Carlos Castaño (Marcella & Schulz 1999: 217). In practice, it is perhaps more correct to describe them as 'loose cannons', who often act like lawless bandits, rather than enforcing the law and order they claim (BBC News Online 30 April 2001: '*US declares Castano's AUC a terrorist organisation*'). Currently, they are responsible for the largest proportion of political killings in Colombia, around 76% in the first nine months of 1998, compared to 2.7% attributed to the security forces and 21.3% to the guerrillas (Marcella & Schulz 2000: 8). Hence they are sometimes referred to as 'death squads'. Significantly, because of their rightist leanings, they often derive their income from large landowners or from the drug barons themselves, who prefer to pay off the paramilitaries rather than organize their own private armies for protection. There are also reports of the paramilitaries taxing or protecting coca plantations. It has been argued – notably by Fernando Tapias, the Commanding General of the Colombian Armed Forces - that in some ways there is little difference between these groups and the guerrillas, both posing a threat to the state's legitimacy and authority (Marcella & Schulz 1999: 217.) They do both pose such a threat, but the crucial difference is that the armed forces tend to see the paramilitaries as allies in the battle against the guerrillas, which - rather than the 'war on drugs' - continues to be their main concern.

The 'war system'

The important point made here is that each of these groups is, in one way or another, involved in or connected to the international drugs trade. Not only the drugs groups themselves, but also the government, the military, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries profit *directly* or *indirectly* from the proceeds of this lucrative business. Significantly, however, these connections are rarely pointed out. This may be understandable in the case of the Colombian government and its armed forces, which are after all nominally fighting a war against such corruption and profit making, but it is striking that outside forces (notably the US) also turn a blind eye to these connections. Instead, successive governments in Colombia, the US and other countries have, for various reasons that will be discussed below, found it conducive to their interests and strategies in the 'war on drugs' to focus on other linkages – usually the so-called 'narco-guerrilla' but sometimes also the 'narco-paramilitary' link.

This complex situation that is prevalent in the Colombian state and society has so far defied all attempts at disentanglement, let alone resolution. The thesis put forward in this essay is that none of the various 'actors' outlined above is in a position significantly to change the situation, indeed that all have a strong vested interest in the status quo. Richani has described this as a 'self-perpetuating war system'. Originating in socio-political inequalities long present in Colombian society that generated a guerrilla response, this situation became consolidated 'via expansion of its socio-economic base', due to the drug trade and also to smuggling, robbery and kidnapping. He claims that the different antagonistic groups present in Colombia have succeeded in establishing a 'positive-sum, political economy of scale', which ensures that continuation of the status quo is in everybody's interest. The 'war system survives as the product of a precarious balance of forces among the antagonists. This situation of relative equilibrium, combined with the military and political stalemate that results, permits some interests of the main actors to coincide' (Richani 1997: 38).

As Richani sees it, it is in the military's interest – while it cannot actually beat its main enemy the guerrillas – to keep things as they are, and benefit from raises in military expenditure and US support. This is why it is keen to emphasize the alleged narco-guerrilla link and is in favour of a militarised solution to the 'problem' (Richani 1997: 53). The guerrillas meanwhile – though nominally determined to effect change - are not in a position to either win the war against their state, nor to have their main demands catered for by legislation and social transformation. And, when FARC did, after negotiations, form the political party Patriotic Union (UP) in the period 1986-

1991, most of its candidates were subsequently killed by the paramilitaries and the drugs gangs (Economist Survey 2001: 10). In the meantime, the guerrillas also have a strong vested interest in maintaining their position as a very well-funded and powerful actor. The same can be said of the paramilitaries. Those members of government that are not directly corrupted by drugs money have an incentive to continue receiving US military and political aid, which acts as a stabilising force for a vulnerable political system.[3]

In a sense, this makes the whole problem like squeezing a balloon. The more the Colombian government, with US encouragement, escalates its war against the drug lords, the more they escalate the violence. This happened in 1989 until the level of violence was so intolerable the government changed the constitution in favour of the drug lords – banning extradition to the US. The more the Colombian government attempts to attack the drugs industry by eradicating crops - through aerial spraying and strong pressure, but little assistance to farmers to turn to alternative crops, the more this causes damage to the environment and to peasants' livelihood, driving dissatisfied, marginalized peasants into the hands of the guerrillas. The more the guerrillas are fought, the more this strengthens the paramilitaries, who often work for the drug lords. Meanwhile, the Colombian government and the US choose not to attack the paramilitaries, who are after all, responsible for the majority of the violence.

One could argue that the whole situation amounts to a battle for the hearts and minds of the underclasses within Colombia, who thus bestow legitimacy and support upon their 'benefactors'. While the drug lords in particular are often seeking for personal prestige and honour, ultimately they seek legitimacy and public support. Many have formed political parties, or have put themselves up for election - Escobar was even elected to Congress in 1982. The guerrillas nominally have clear political goals, while the armed forces are arguably keen to maintain their status of relative independence and fight their guerrilla enemy. The government cannot deny these interests and has to take this into account in its strategy in the wars on drugs and insurgency. Clearly, this raises questions about who really is in power, and who is vying for legitimacy and political power. Given the definition of the 'state' outlined in the introduction, this leads one to ask: Who or what is the state in Colombia?

[3] This is not to say that all members of the Colombian government are completely corrupt. Some clearly do have an interest in maintaining political power by solving Colombia's various problems.

Before this is addressed, external intervention and the role of the United States will be examined.

External intervention: The US extends its 'war on drugs' to Colombia

While Colombia is primarily a site of production and export of illegal drugs, it does not have a very high rate of drug consumption. The countries facing the highest rates of drug consumption and related health and social problems are the Western developed countries and the country with the highest rate of cocaine consumption is the United States. Since the late 1960s, a string of US administrations has been fighting a 'war on drugs'. As stated earlier, this aim was first declared by President Nixon in the early 1970s, but was revived with much fanfare under President Reagan in the early 1980s. Its declared strategy is to reduce the consumption of illegal drugs in the US by lessening the inward flow ('interdiction') and by attacking production in the source countries ('eradication'). The US has taken the war on drugs to countries such as Thailand, Turkey, Mexico, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia. While the US initially recognised the drugs problem as a national domestic one, it increasingly emphasises the global systemic threat of the international drugs trade as a major component of transnational organized crime.

The US first became seriously involved in Colombia under the Reagan administration. In the Andean region in general, and in Colombia in particular, the US ran a major operation called the *Andean Initiative* during the Bush Senior administration. In 1999, a major new initiative was agreed upon with the Colombian government and in concert with European Union countries. Called *Plan Colombia*, it is a US$ 7.5 billion programme and in the eyes of many, it represents a major escalation of the war on drugs and presages increased intervention by the US government. President Pastrana has pledged US$ 4 billion of Colombian resources towards this; the international community is expected to come up with the rest. So far, the US has committed US$ 1.3 billion towards this programme, European countries somewhat less. Its five components are as follows: 1) support for human rights and judicial reform; 2) the expansion of counter-narcotics operations into southern Colombia; 3) assistance for alternative economic development; 4) increased interdiction efforts; 5) assistance for the Colombian National Police (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2000: 1).

The rationale underlying this policy of increasing aid to Colombia stems from what drug czar General Barry McCaffrey perceives as a 'drug emergency' in Colombia – that is a dramatic increase in coca production in some of the southern provinces controlled by

Colombia's largest guerrilla group, FARC. The argument is that Colombia, and by extension the US, is losing the war on drugs because of an inability to eradicate coca production in the areas the guerrillas' control. At the same time the Colombian government is losing the war against the guerrillas because of the US perception that 'the Colombian armed forces are outgunned by insurgents flush with the "taxes" they collect from coca growers' (LeoGrande & Sharpe 2000: 1).

The crux of the problem in this complex situation is the dividing line between counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency. If one chooses to differentiate between these problems, then Colombia is arguably fighting at least two wars at once – the aforementioned counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency wars. The Colombian government itself has long maintained that it is useful to differentiate between the two, and further, that it is valuable to differentiate between the economic aspects of the drugs industry and the related (and perhaps more visibly harmful) violence associated with the drugs industry and its modus operandi.

Ostensibly, the US support this approach. Phil Chicola, the US State Department's Director of Andean Affairs, was recently quoted as affirming: 'We are committed to maintaining a line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency' (Marcella & Schulz 2000: 17). But is this really what the US is doing? Even if this is the declared US line, some writers claim that it is impossible for any strategy to differentiate between the two; rather that the only way forward is to view the two as being part of a complex, which must be addressed holistically (Marcella & Schulz 2000: 17). Some claim that the US war on drugs 'cannot be won in the Colombian rain forest', and that by attempting to do so, the US does indeed make two wars into one; and that such a strategy simply helps to cement the current situation more firmly (LeoGrande & Sharpe 2000: 10). Others claim that what the US is really interested in is keeping the left-wing insurgency under control, and that the 'war on drugs' is but a smokescreen to hide this (Chomsky 2000: 4).

To win its war on drugs, the US propagates a military solution (Johns 1992: 160). To this extent, the largest proportion of the US's contribution to *Plan Colombia* will go towards military purposes (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2000: 1/2). Indeed, the way the strategy is phrased and framed assumes that a military solution can be

found and implemented[4]. The militarization of the war on drugs in Colombia means at the very least giving military aid to the Colombian armed forces. Sometimes this takes the form of intelligence and logistics assistance. At the other end of the spectrum it means actual high-tech weaponry transfers and training, or even military intervention (Guardian Weekly April 26 – May 2, 2001: '*British Generals sent to Colombia*'). The problem with this policy is that the Colombian armed forces have a questionable human rights record, an indirect involvement in the drugs industry, and a high level of corruption. Moreover their ulterior motive for fighting the war on drugs is arguably to crush the guerrillas once and for all. To this extent US strategy is flawed, biased and ethically dubious because it fails to distinguish between the two wars.

As has been pointed out, the attempt to lump these two failing wars together risks the development of a major war that is unwinnable. The danger is that 'the military escalation contemplated by the United States will only intensify the violence in Colombia, make a negotiated settlement of the insurgency more difficult, and have no impact whatsoever on the supply of drugs entering the United States' (LeoGrande & Sharpe 2000: 1). Arguably, US policy makes the state of affairs in Colombia even worse. 'Put simply, by focusing almost entirely on counternarcotics, without regard for the impact on Colombia's other conflicts, U.S. policy has weakened the state's ability to deal with guerrilla and paramilitary violence' (Marcella & Schulz 1999: 213). Furthermore, in this way, the Colombian military is forced to fight a counter-insurgency war in the process of fighting the war on drugs. Again the focus is on the alleged 'narco-guerrilla' link (Joyce & Malamud 1998: 81).

The result of this strategy is that outside states – mainly the US but also the other, states involved in *Plan Colombia* – become indirectly implicated in the drugs industry. (Western societies are already directly implicated by creating the demand for the illegal drugs, and thus the incentive for the whole drugs industry.) In this sense these states also become actors in the international drugs trade, and become part of the problem, while they are, nominally at least, trying to be party to the solution. This strategy exacerbates the problem, creating even more drug-related violence in Colombia, and stands a good chance of ensuring that the 'war system' remains in place.

Many have therefore concluded that the war on drugs – at least as it has been fought by the US for the past 30 years – is flawed (Bertram 1996: 13). It is at least very

[4] After all, is fighting crime really a 'war'?

difficult to argue that it has been successful. Certainly, many have argued that the war on drugs cannot be won by concentrating on fighting supply alone. On the face of it the US does not only fight supply. Its war on drugs contains components such as demand reduction, education, health programmes, and domestic interdiction. However, it remains the case that the largest proportion of money devoted to the war on drugs goes towards the militarization of the war overseas in the source countries. And it is worth pointing out that these studies are not all by left wing writers critical of US administration and policy. A study by a think tank close to the US armed forces found that military efforts to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the US will not and cannot succeed (Reuter, Crawford & Cave for RAND 1988).

To sum up, the US, insisting on fighting its 'war on drugs' overseas by attempting to reduce supply, intervenes in Colombia. Intent on a strategy of militarizing the war, it directly supports the Colombian armed forces, who are not only implicated in the drugs business, but who are also engaged in fighting the guerrilla insurgency. As outlined above, this contributes to the fact that the 'war system' in Colombia remains entrenched, as the internal situation in Colombia cannot be solved. Thus the US also becomes indirectly implicated in the international drugs trade.

Who or what is the state in Colombia?

The result of the complex socio-political-economic situation Colombia is that the huge profits of the illegal drug industry, falling on the fertile ground of a country with a history of social disparity, violence, and corruption, serve to undermine the different social groups in Colombia and therefore the state in its broader sense. A 'war system' is established, in which the different actors have a vested interest in the situation remaining as it is. As has been highlighted in the chapter above, US intervention, while unable to stop the supply of cocaine to its shores, only serves to exacerbate the problem. The US becomes indirectly implicated as well and becomes part of the 'war system'. In this way the Colombian state in its totality becomes criminalized and corrupt, lawless and violent to an even greater degree. This has led some commentators to term it a 'failed state' (Politi 1997: 15; Marcella & Schulz 1999: 213).

At the same time, in many areas the other factions within Colombia have largely taken over many of the regular functions of the state (Shelley 1995: 468). Because of the lack of a monopoly of power, the weakness of the judiciary system and a breakdown in

law and order – the trappings of a 'failed' state - security, private (in)justice, law and order are increasingly provided by these groups (Economist Survey 2001: 6/7). The drug cartels are well known for contributing to social projects of various kinds. Thus drug lords have provided for welfare, health care, schooling, football fields and in the case of Escobar, even a public zoo on one of his estates. Escobar also built a whole housing complex for the poor in his native Medellin, which became known as 'barrio Pablo Escobar'. The guerrillas do the same. Not only do they often guarantee the security of the villages and rural strongholds they control, they also offer welfare and schooling, and in a sense law and order, stability and jobs (Richani 1997: 44/48). This is particularly true of the so-called 'demilitarised zone' in which they reign supreme. Similarly, the paramilitaries control parts of the country and provide a form of law and order (Economist Survey 2001: 13). In some particularly remote areas, the military is the only official representative of the state. The vast number of legitimate private security companies operating in Colombia – a group not touched upon in this essay – is a reflection of the desire for protection a government and its institutions cannot provide.

As some writers have shown, this is in many ways how sophisticated criminal enterprises – notably the different mafia groups in Italy in the 19th century - established themselves (Shelley 1995: 476). Because the state is unable to provide protection, other organisations take over and provide what the state cannot, thus fostering support among the population. Richani goes so far as to argue that the war-system replaces a 'normal' democracy's functions in terms of arbitrating conflict, a crude form of law and order and (in)justice, and redistribution of wealth and resources (Richani 1997: 69). This raises the question of what a state is, what crime is, and when the two are interchangeable.

If, as this essay has done, one takes a mainstream 'realist' IR definition of the state, ie the state as its 'national-territorial totality' (Halliday 1994: 78), in which the state is all that is contained within its borders, the conclusion must be that the Colombian 'state' is losing the war on drugs, that it is corrupted and that its overall sovereignty and authority have been drastically reduced. However, as Halliday points out, this conceptualisation of the state is 'one replete with legal and value assumptions … that states are equal, that they control their territory, that they coincide with nations, that they represent their peoples' (Halliday 1994: 81). Clearly the Colombian state, defined as such, does not control all its territory, nor represent its people in their entirety.

If one takes a more Marxist/Weberian conception of the state - ie one in which the state is understood as a bundle of 'coercive-administrative' institutions, or one in which the 'state' is understood to have a monopoly on violence (Halliday 1994: 79) - the implication is that since in Colombia the groups involved in the drugs business have taken over many of the state's functions and each hold partial monopolies of violence, therefore these groups and their crimes have become the state. This corresponds with Tilly's finding that (European) states originated as protection rackets, ie as instruments of 'coercion and extraction', both vis-à-vis their populations and their rivals (Tilly in: Evans, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1985: 172).

The answer to the question of 'who is the state in Colombia?' is that 'Colombia' is not one 'state', but a large swathe of territory with around five 'states' controlling different geographical and functional parts. It may therefore be concluded that the Colombian state in its totality has become criminalized - Colombia has become a 'crime-state'. It has become an actor or a pillar in the international drugs trade and a vital component of it. One must deduce that transnational organized crime in general, and the international drugs trade specifically, has the power to undermine weak states such as Colombia to the extent that their role in international relations is shaped by this force.

If the profits to be made from the trade in illegal drugs can create a transnational force strong enough to implicate states, change their internal power structures and influence the debate on the definitions of concepts central to International Relations theory such as the 'state', 'crime' and 'war', they have become a truly awesome force. If its role in the *international drugs trade* has resulted in Colombia's becoming a 'failed state', what is the function of a 'failed' or 'crime' state in *international relations* in general?

Ultimately, if it is true that the security environment of the post-Cold War era facilitates the growth of transnational organized crime and the international drugs trade, one could argue that globalization is the driving force behind the international drugs trade. Colombia is a particularly vivid example of the effect the drugs trade can have on a state that was already weak. The situation there has developed so far that the overall situation of transnational organized crime in Colombia may be described as being in the 'symbiotic stage', in which the 'host, the legitimate political and economic sectors now become dependent upon the parasite, the monopolies and networks of organized crime to sustain itself' (Lupsha 1996: 32). Within the overarching framework of globalization, Colombia may thus be termed a 'courtesan state', one which serves

the interests embodied in neoliberal globalization and which is a central element in the global policy framework of neoliberalism (Mittelman & Johnston 1999: 117). This, ultimately, is its role in the wider context of an increasingly globalized world.

Conclusion and implications for International Relations

The international trade in illegal drugs, and specifically the huge profits generated and the related violence fuelled by it, have the potential to corrupt the state and all the major social and political groups within it. The combination of the factors that Colombia was a drugs-producing country and also a weak state mired by a long-lasting civil war has enabled precisely this to happen. The impact of the international drugs trade thus acts as a powerful catalyst and reinforces this pre-existing situation. Because of the particular nature of the drugs industry in Colombia – and its complexity – the situation becomes a 'war system'. Both Colombia and the US in a sense become parts of this system, become actors - if involuntary ones - in the international drugs trade, and therefore in transnational organized crime. Colombia is thus a 'failed state' or a 'crime-state' in the sense that it is difficult to determine who exactly *is* the state. The strength of the international drugs trade is such that even a far more powerful and far less corrupted state, the United States, became involved and in a sense implicated, helping to entrench the 'war system'. All of this happened even though both the Colombian and US governments are in the process of fighting this transnational force. In the light of the 'new security agenda' postulated after the end of the Cold War, this truly seems a fearsome challenge to the international system.

One implication for future policy might be to address the underlying causes of a 'failing state' before it becomes so highly corrupted. Colombia is not the only such state and by no means the only one so highly involved in the drugs business. It has been pointed out that each time developed countries neglect a developing country in trouble it becomes a drug hub (Politi 1997: 15)[5]. Given that the demand and the high prices for illegal drugs stem from the richer countries, a shift away from the focus on fighting the supply side might be prudent.

Can the 'war on drugs' ever be won while Colombia and the US are implicated in this way and strategy remains as it is? It must be deemed highly unlikely. If it is really the huge *profits* of the drugs trade that are its critical element, and if the profits are only

[5] Objects for future research could be Afghanistan, Lebanon, Burma and Pakistan.

so high because of the illegality of the commodities in question, the implication is that decriminalisation and some form of regulation might be worth considering (Strange 1996: 121). After all, coca has always been and continues to be chewed by farmers and the poor in the Andean region. This was long considered perfectly legitimate, as was the consumption of cocaine for medicinal and recreational purposes in Western society; it was only criminalized in the early 20th Century. Far more tobacco is consumed in all parts of the world than are illegal drugs, but tobacco's legality ensures that its trade can be regulated. It can hardly be argued that the tobacco trade is a destabilising force in international relations, even though it has also proved itself capable of corruption on a large scale.

The question of the role of the state raises questions for International Relations theory. What does it tell us that on the one hand the Colombian and US *governments* are fighting and arguably losing the war on drugs, but at the same time the Colombian *state* in its entirety is corrupted and implicated in the drugs trade to the extent that it has become a 'crime-state'? What does this tell us in terms of the conceptualisation of the 'state'? This essay has found that if one chooses a Weberian/Marxist definition of the 'state' as a 'coercive-administrative' entity, as opposed to the more mainstream 'national-territorial' definition, the fact that no one entity, but *several* groups within Colombia hold partial monopolies of power, shows that there is no simple answer to the question of: 'Who or what is the state in Colombia?' This conclusion implies that the conceptualisation of the 'state' in International Relations theory must be a focus of further research (Halliday 1994: 76).

Furthermore, what does this tell us about 'war' as in the 'war' on drugs? If it is true, as Tilly tells us, that both war making and state making are quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy, and that it is essentially war that creates states in the first place, then these groups in Colombia are in the process not only of making profits, but of carving out the limits of future states (Tilly in: Evans, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1985: 169). However, if it is true that they are in equilibrium, as Richani suggests, no single group will prevail. As van Creveld has noted, in this post-Cold War environment, 'once the legal monopoly of armed force, long claimed by the state, is wrested out of its hands, existing distinctions between war and crime will break down' (van Creveld 1991: 204).

Finally, what is the *role* of the state in the international illicit drugs trade in the case of Colombia? It can perhaps best be described as the role of 'courtesan' state, a state which within the overarching framework of globalization serves the needs of the global economy as shaped by neo-liberalism. While the US is hardly a courtesan state, its demand for drugs, its desire to curb this need, and its subsequent intervention in Colombia play no small role in this complex and worrying situation. One should therefore perhaps talk of the 'globalization of organized crime' and place transnational organized crime within the framework of this larger phenomenon. Some have talked of a triad of 'the globalization of organized crime, the rise of the courtesan state, and the corruption of civil society' in reference to Colombia (Mittelman & Johnston 1999: 123).

Given the seemingly unending demand, the economic incentive in the international drugs trade is driven like any other major trading commodity in the global economy. This is not to say that globalization is all-powerful and that transnational organized crime will take over the world and become the new overarching structure to shape international relations. There are also countervailing forces to such a development.

Firstly, it has to be pointed out that it is not in the interest of the drugs trade to undermine the existing system completely. After all, it relies upon the global economic, social and political infrastructure to ply its trade. Without the demand created by users in affluent societies, markets and means with which to provide these customers with their desired commodity, and channels through which to move and launder the profits generated from this business, the profiteers in the international drugs trade would not be in the position they are. One can therefore see the rise of groups dedicated to providing security and other services that the government cannot provide as a form of 'counterglobalization'. 'Transnational organized crime encapsulates both globalization and counterglobalization' (Mittelman & Johnston 1999: 122). Secondly, by no means all states are undermined in such a way. As this essay has argued, it is only on the fertile ground of 'weak' states that the international drugs trade can have such an impact. Colombia may serve as an example of such a state. Quite possibly it would have continued to suffer the effects of unresolved social and political problems, given its history of corruption and lack of state control. The international drugs trade simply works as a powerful catalyst. Thirdly, the international system and its members are beginning to appreciate the effects of globalization and new efforts are being made to regulate it and combat its worst consequences. Fourthly, it can be argued that globalization is not as all-powerful as it is sometimes held to be. Some claim that in areas such as trade, foreign investment and flows of labour, the current level of

internationalisation is not higher than in the period before 1914. Furthermore, eventually there was a backlash by the dominant states at the time, resulting in the protectionist, highly nationalistic economic and foreign policies which partly led to the First World War.

So while it may be argued that ultimately, the international drugs trade is primarily an *economic* phenomenon and must be placed within the context of globalization, this does not necessarily herald an age dominated wholly by transnational organized crime. In the meantime however, given the potential of globalization to impact in a differentiated manner upon states and their societies, the international drugs trade has the potential to undermine a weak state such as Colombia, thus forcing it to play the subordinated role of a 'courtesan state' in international relations.

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