

Colombia Can Teach Afghanistan (and the United States) How to Win

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On 1 December 2009, Pres. Barack Obama revealed his new strategy for Afghanistan.¹ After adding 30,000 US Soldiers and Marines to the fight in 2010, the president intends to begin withdrawing US forces in July 2011 and turning responsibility for security over to Afghanistan's forces. Mr. Obama's plan calls for Afghanistan's army to be ready for this responsibility in 18 months. Yet, in spite of years of effort, Afghanistan's security forces will struggle to meet this goal. In the recent battle for Marja in Afghanistan's Helmand province, US and British infantry had to lead the assault against the Taliban, a worrisome indicator of the Afghan army's readiness.²

Recent US government reports reached troubling conclusions about Afghanistan's army. For example, 19 percent of the soldiers in the Afghan army quit or desert each year.³ The Afghan army lacks competent leadership at all levels as well as the ability to generate qualified leaders rapidly. Moreover, although the US government spent more than \$5.6 billion in fiscal year 2009 on training and supporting Afghanistan's security forces, the number of Afghan battalions qualified to operate independently actually declined.⁴ In spite of these problems with Afghanistan's existing army, Afghan and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) officials want to accelerate its expansion, from 97,000 troops currently to

171,600 by the end of 2011 and 240,000 within five years.⁵

Ten years ago, Colombia faced a security crisis in many ways worse than the one Afghanistan currently faces. But over the past decade, Colombia has sharply reduced its murder and kidnapping rates, crushed the array of insurgent groups fighting against the government, demobilized the paramilitary groups that arose during the power vacuum of the 1990s, and significantly restored the rule of law and presence of government throughout the country.

Over the past decade, with the assistance of a team of US advisers, Colombia rebuilt its army. In contrast to the current plan for Afghanistan, Colombia focused on quality, not quantity. Its army and other security forces have achieved impressive success against an insurgency in many ways similar to Afghanistan's. Meanwhile, despite the assistance of nearly 100,000 NATO soldiers and many billions of dollars spent on security assistance, the situation in Afghanistan seems to be deteriorating.

Afghan and US officials struggling to build an effective Afghan army can learn from Colombia's success. This article explores the similarities and differences between the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Colombia, examines how Colombia reformed its security forces, and discusses how to apply Colombia's success to Afghanistan.

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Similarities and Differences between the Insurgencies in Colombia and Afghanistan

Counterinsurgency forces in Colombia and Afghanistan face several similar challenges. First, rugged terrain in both countries provides locations for insurgents to hide and limits the ground mobility of counterinsurgent forces. Second, insurgents in both Colombia and Afghanistan take advantage of cross-border sanctuaries and have financed their operations with narco-trafficking.

At their worst, the two insurgent forces had similar strengths. At their peak strengths (around 2001), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) insurgent groups could field a combined 21,500 fighters, about 1.9 fighters for every 1,000 military-aged males in Colombia.⁶ The upper estimate of the Taliban's current strength is 17,000, or 2.3 fighters for every 1,000 military-aged males in Afghanistan.⁷

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the rule of law in Colombia was minimal. In 1995 a quarter of Colombia's municipalities had no police.⁸ In the late 1990s, Colombia's annual murder rate was 62 per 100,000—nearly 10 times that of the United States.⁹ The police and court systems were thoroughly corrupt, and paramilitary militias formed in the absence of state authority.¹⁰ Ernesto Samper, president of Colombia from 1994 to 1998, reached office in the employ of Colombia's drug cartels.¹¹ In 2009, as a result of the insurgency, 2,412 Afghan civilians were killed—about 8.5 per 100,000 Afghans.¹² One could argue that in the late 1990s, Colombia's corruption, violence, and government ineffectiveness were worse than Afghanistan's today.

At the end of the 1990s, when Colombia's security situation was at its worst, the Colombian government lost nearly all ability to counter insurgent forces. FARC military units willingly engaged the Colombian army in open conventional combat. In Au-

gust 1996, a FARC force overran a Colombian army base in the Putumayo district, killing and capturing more than 100 soldiers. In March 1998, FARC fighters annihilated the 52nd Counter-Guerilla Battalion, considered at the time one of the army's elite units.¹³

Obviously, some stark differences exist between Colombia and Afghanistan. Colombia is a wealthier country, providing an indigenous base of income to pay for security forces. As fractured as Colombia was in the late 1990s, it had a history of effective central government. It also had experience with the Western notion of the rule of law. Afghanistan has little or no such history.

More tangibly, although the Colombian government was either ineffective or corrupt in the late 1990s, it at least had the structures of army and police forces in place. In 2002 the rebuilding of the Afghan army started from zero.¹⁴

Finally, the nature of international security assistance to the two countries is different. Colombia has one ally: the United States. America limits its military assistance to no more than 800 trainers, who are prohibited from accompanying Colombian security forces on combat operations. Although the United States' security assistance mission in Colombia is one of its largest, it pales in size compared to the mission in Afghanistan. There, more than 40 countries will provide close to 140,000 soldiers (in 2010), who will execute a variety of military missions.¹⁵ But the most important difference is the Colombian army's focus on quality, the factor that best explains Colombia's success.

How Colombia Fixed Its Army

Reform of Colombia's army began during Andrés Pastrana's term as president (1998–2002) and accelerated during Pres. Álvaro Uribe's tenure (2002–present).¹⁶ Three key reforms converted the Colombian army from an ineffective, garrison-bound band into an aggressive force that has crippled the FARC and ELN.

New Leadership

In 1998, at the urging of US officials, Pastrana replaced the top three leaders in the army with new generals (Fernando Tapias, Jorge Enrique Mora, and Carlos Ospina) who were trained at US military schools and who had extensive combat experience at the battalion and brigade levels.¹⁷ This new trio then replaced their subordinate commanders who lacked aggressiveness in the field. At this time, the Colombian army began to emphasize the selection and training of better-quality noncommissioned officers for the army's combat units.¹⁸ In his book *A Question of Command*, Mark Moyar studies a variety of counterinsurgency campaigns, asserting that leadership quality rather than campaign plans or tactics is the key to success.¹⁹ Colombia's performance against its insurgents bolsters Moyar's argument.

Reorganization

Beginning with the Pastrana administration and extending into Uribe's, Colombia reorganized its army into a mobile and highly skilled professional component; additionally, a draftee component formed for local security.²⁰ Under the tutelage of trainers from US Army special forces, the professional component of the army established numerous air-mobile, ranger, mountain-warfare, counterdrug, and special forces battalions.²¹ These units improved the army's overall effectiveness by specializing in specific tasks. Perhaps as important, Uribe focused the draftee portion of the army on village defense. He created more than 600 home-guard platoons, each composed of about 40 soldiers stationed in their hometowns, to provide basic security and collect intelligence on insurgent activity. These platoons interdicted the movement of insurgent units in the countryside and freed the professional army for offensive operations.²² The Colombian army also increased spending on logistics support and intelligence analysis, activities supported by the US advisory team.²³

Helicopters

Finally, Colombia's army and police expanded their inventory of helicopters from about 20 in 1998 to 255 by late 2008. To overcome Colombia's mountainous and forested terrain, the army needed air mobility. Today, with extensive US support, the Colombian army operates the world's third-largest fleet of UH-60 Blackhawk assault helicopters.²⁴ Colombia's helicopter fleet has made possible the army's offensive doctrine against insurgent support areas.

As a result of these and other reforms, the Colombian army inflicted severe damage on the FARC and ELN. One study estimated that, between 2002 and 2008, army attacks cut FARC offensive capabilities by 70 percent. By 2008 FARC military units, which overwhelmed Colombian army battalions in the 1990s, were unable to function in units larger than squad size. Between 2006 and 2008, more than 3,000 FARC fighters deserted the organization. FARC's remaining forces are believed to be scattered, disorganized, and cut off from their top-level leadership, which has fled into exile in Ecuador and Venezuela.²⁵

Colombia's Lessons for Afghanistan

Officials charged with building Afghanistan's army can learn three lessons from Colombia.

Quality Beats Quantity

Afghan and NATO officials seek to increase the size of the Afghan army from about 100,000 troops to nearly a quarter of a million.²⁶ In Colombia, by contrast, a professional army of just 86,000 has crushed a large and stubborn insurgency, essentially pacifying a country almost twice the size of Afghanistan and almost as rugged. Assisted by no more than 800 US trainers (who do not accompany the Colombian army into combat), Colombia has focused on selecting quality leaders, training the noncommis-

sioned officer corps, and developing specialized rather than general-purpose combat units within the professional portion of the army. In Afghanistan the goal is rapid expansion of the army's head count, regardless of whether the necessary leadership structure exists to sustain this increase. As a Soldier who spent his career in special operations, Gen Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, is no doubt fully aware of the virtues of quality—a fact that makes this rapid growth in head count all the more puzzling. The lesson from Colombia is to freeze the expansion of Afghanistan's national army, emphasize soldier quality and leadership development, and create specialized units for required security tasks.

Home Guard

A current problem with Afghanistan's army (and formerly a problem in Colombia) is the unwillingness of many soldiers to serve far from their home villages and districts. Consequently, the Afghan national army suffers from high absenteeism and desertion.²⁷ As described above, President Uribe created home-guard platoons composed of draftees who serve in their villages and departments. Instead of expanding the size of the Afghan national army, the Afghan government should permit (and fund) district and provincial governors to form such home-guard units for local defense. Wardak Province is experimenting with the somewhat similar Afghan Public Protection Program.²⁸ Furthermore, in Nangarhar Province, the US military is providing assistance directly to a large tribe that has turned against the Taliban.²⁹ The US and Afghan governments should use the results of these experiments to improve and expand locally based units.

Helicopters

Like Colombia, Afghanistan faces the challenge of finding and massing against insurgent forces in difficult terrain. Colombia established a large helicopter force to bring mobility to its highly trained professional army and to evacuate casualties from the battlefield. Instead of raising the Afghan army's head count, US military assistance should emphasize this aspect of combat support.

Lessons for the US Campaign in Afghanistan

The United States could apply Colombia's experience to its campaign in Afghanistan. Most importantly, US military trainers should concentrate on constantly improving the quality, and not the size, of Afghanistan's 97,000-man national army. In addition, the Afghan army's own training and support establishment should bolster the district-level home-guard program rather than support continued expansion of the Afghan National Army. Lastly, the US security assistance program should expand Afghanistan's helicopter program.

Afghan and NATO campaign plans seek rapid expansion of the Afghan army even though Afghanistan lacks effective leaders to staff this increase, the logistics system to support it, or the helicopters to move it effectively through Afghanistan's vast and rugged terrain. A decade ago, facing similar circumstances, Colombia's leaders, assisted by a small team of US advisers, implemented a different solution that put Colombians in the lead, and, with patience, achieved great success. US and Afghan officials should learn from Colombia as they attempt to build an effective Afghan army. ✪

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Notes

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