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Residual Organized Armed Groups and Cross-Border Threats in Alto Putumayo

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Abstract

During the last decade, coca leaf cultivation has increased significantly in Colombia, with the residual organized armed groups (grupos armados organizados residuales, GAOR) being the main actors involved in the illicit drug trade in the border area between Peru and Colombia. Since 2016, the GAOR have been considered criminal organizations that not only base their economy on illicit activities, but also violate the human rights of the communities living in that region. In the absence of the Peruvian state, the GAOR have consolidated themselves in the area and their economic activities – to a large extent – are the only alternative for the surrounding population to escape poverty. In this sense, this article analyses the impact of the GAOR on security and national development.

Keywords: GAOR, Territorial Integrity, Internal Order, National Development, Contemporary Threats.

Introduction

According to the United Nations World Drug Report 2021, in the last 24 years the potency of cannabis has quadrupled and the percentage of adolescents who perceive this drug as harmful has decreased by up to 40%.

1 These data should certainly draw the attention of policy makers in all States to effectively combat illicit drug trafficking (IDT) and to restructure educational plans aimed at developing a critical awareness of drug use. Despite the restrictions imposed during the COVID–19 pandemic, criminal organizations found other mechanisms to continue and even boost their illicit business, which has generated a greater dynamism of the IDT at the global level, a situation shown by the increase in both the methods of contact for delivery and international supply chains.


2 Ibid.
According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, last year Latin America accounted for all the world’s production of coca leaf, cocaine base paste and cocaine hydrochloride, while the Caribbean continues to be the most frequent route for drug trafficking to the United States. Unfortunately, illicit drug production activities are developed in countries such as Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, where the indigenous and peasant population is used by drug traffickers for the cultivation of coca, marijuana and poppy, given their economic needs.

In this regard, in the border area between Colombia and Peru, the residual organized armed groups (grupos armados organizados residuales, GAOR) are involved in drug trafficking as the main source of financing on both sides of the 1,626 kilometers they share as a border. This situation has become a constant concern for both states, as drug trafficking directly impacts communities in the area. Some experts even claim that the Peruvian state has lost control of these areas. In this context, this article analyzes both the existing problems in the border region between Colombia and Peru, as well as their implications for the security and development of the Peruvian State.

FARC Remnants and the Capture of Alto Putumayo

In 2016, the Colombian national government and the FARC-EP guerrillas signed the Final Agreement for the Termination of the Armed Conflict

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 14.
they were facing.\textsuperscript{8} Despite this, the GAOR, made up of FARC-EP dissidents, emerged, seeking to maintain effective control of the territories they still occupy.\textsuperscript{9} In other words, the GAOR are relatively new and their interest, unlike that of the FARC-EP, is focused on illicit economic activities. Precisely because of the way they operate, it might be said that they have put aside political discourse and doctrine to emphasize economic interests.

As mentioned, the GAOR operate on both sides of the Colombia-Peru border, particularly in Upper and Lower Putumayo. For this reason, this area “will continue to be a focus of drug trafficking with all the consequences that this illicit activity entails for national security.”\textsuperscript{10} However, unlike the FARC-EP, these groups do not have an ideology, and drug trafficking is basically a highly profitable activity that provides them with a solution to their immediate problems.

Intelligence operations carried out by the Colombian Armed Forces have identified that - in this area - two groups (Structure-48 and Structure-1) are fighting for control of the territory and drug trafficking routes.\textsuperscript{11} Of these, Structure-48 is the strongest and dominates the Alto Putumayo border zone.\textsuperscript{12} In this sense, this organization differs from the rest because it operates as a company with a certain work ethic, which includes not extorting money from the community or forced recruitment. Consequently, for the purpose of recruiting its members, it offers to pay salaries that are well above the average Colombian salary and that can increase depending on the work performed.\textsuperscript{13} However, Structure-48 is at odds with Structure-1, the latter located in the Southeast bloc\textsuperscript{14} and made up of former members

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} Pamela Pirateque Perdomo, “Los grupos armados organizados residuales: ...,” 44.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Edwin Choque, Meet GAOR Cor Colombia, (video minute 9:41) (June 9, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_og2mxQOvo (Accessed June 20, 2022).
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid. (video minute 10:10).
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid. (video minute 16:48).
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid. (video minute 18:46).
\end{itemize}
of the Second Marquetalia and the narco-paramilitary gang La Constru. Consequently, the border region of Alto Putumayo - between Colombia and Peru - is the area where both Structures have found shelter for the development of their illicit activities, mainly the TID.

**Drug trafficking: Related crimes and economic proposal in times of recession**

According to the 2017 United Nations Report Against Drugs and Crime, the area of coca cultivation in the province of Putumayo (Loreto) increased from 1,097 hectares in 2016 to 1,376 hectares in 2017. This production is bought by the GAOR and transported through the Putumayo River to Brazil. In this way, a trade route dominated by these groups is created and, in the absence of State presence, this provides an economic option for the surrounding communities. In this regard, the *Report on the Presence of Armed Groups in Colombia* states that the geographic conditions of Putumayo are “spaces of concealment that also [are] border areas, so that network actions can be generated that cross national borders and reach factions towards Peru and Brazil, where they have alliances with cartels that, in turn, have links in other continents.” Therefore, the GAOR constitute a serious threat to Colombia, as well as to neighboring countries such as Peru.

Undoubtedly, the isolation and the difficulty of direct communication affect the population of the area, since they cannot denounce the extortions, confinements, forced recruitments and selective homicides that exist in Alto Putumayo. In addition, “drug trafficking and the dissidents have created a formalization or alliance in which both sides benefit from illegal money and control of the routes of the eastern plains and the Colombian Pacific.”

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16 Carpio, “Grupos Armados Organizados Residuales de las ex FARC...”, 27.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
In this context, other forms of transnational organized crime such as the illegal trafficking of arms and ammunition, as well as illegal mining and human trafficking are promoted. Therefore, it could be said that, although TID is the main economic activity of GAORs, they are also involved in other associated illicit activities.

Another element that has facilitated the consolidation of the GAOR in these areas is that the population has scarce resources and difficulties in overcoming poverty. Within this population there are indigenous communities that do not have quality education and that have not benefited from the social development projects that the Colombian State has tried to implement, finding themselves at the mercy of the GAOR. In the case of Peru, the situation is not much better. Ninety-five percent of the Peruvian population in the Alto Putumayo area lives in extreme poverty, coping with poor infrastructure, low levels of education and almost no state presence. Unfortunately, the only presence of the state apparatus is given by an Army base, a National Police Station and a Health Post in Soplín Vargas. In this sense, it is essential to call attention to the fragility of this territory, as these conditions are present on both sides of the border, facilitating the consolidation of the GAOR.

In addition, due to the precariousness in which the Peruvian inhabitants of this sector live, it is very common for them to cross the border into Colombia and look for work options there, which are often associated with drug trafficking. The high mobility of the GAOR is another factor to consider. When Colombian authorities carry out operations against these

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23 Ibid., 25.
24 Carpio, “Grupos Armados Organizados Residuales de las ex FARC...”, 27.
25 Ibid., 43.
26 Ibid., 27.
criminal organizations (such as “Plan Espejo” or “Operacion Muralla”), it is common for GAORs to cross the border to take refuge in Peruvian territory. On the other hand, when it is the Peruvian authorities that carry out these operations, the GAOR simply cross to the Colombian side. Consequently, the most effective solution would be coordinated operations between the two countries to ensure territorial control, laying the groundwork for the economic and social development of their populations.

**Threats to national security and prospective scenarios for the country**

The GAOR have technified logistics and an economy that allows them to quickly obtain resources for the development and protection of their activities, so their eradication is an arduous task. To confront these organizations, Colombia has been implementing an integral action (which includes the Military Forces, Police, Prosecutor’s Office, as well as Regional and Local Governments) in order to improve the quality of life of the population, as well as to stabilize and control the territory. To achieve these objectives, constant work is required, as well as the collaboration of neighboring countries to limit the advance of the GAOR.

In addition, 80% of the rural workforce in the Putumayo sector is dedicated to coca leaf cultivation and is also involved in the processing of cocaine hydrochloride. This situation has generated that the crime “has the sympathy of the population, with whom [the GAOR] appear as prosperous businessmen and benefactors (social and economic aid, parties, barbecues, etc.).” Likewise, the Report on the Presence of Armed Groups in Colombia points out that the presence of these groups threatens the native populations due to oil exploitation. Therefore, “a parallel power controlled by criminals

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27 Choque, Meet GAOR Cor Colombia, (video minute 28:51).
29 Choque, Meet GAOR Cor Colombia, (video minute 35:42).
30 Ibid. (video minute 38:15).
31 Carpio, “Grupos Armados Organizados Residuales de las ex FARC...”, 44.
that ends up replacing the State, social violence, corruption and social control of the population are some of the characteristics of the areas that depend on these illicit activities,” presenting the risk of their expansion to other areas. In this context, the consequences could be very unfortunate, because the effects of their presence in the national territory could become synergistic and feed the serious problems that the country already suffers.

**Political decision, military response and multi-sectoral intervention synergy**

Long-term sustainability and support are the main axes under which integrated military operations and actions carried out in these areas should be focused. This is due to the fact that, in order to achieve development in such remote sectors with so many social limitations, it is essential to address the problem with a multisectoral approach, through the implementation of stages and the progressive achievement of objectives. Likewise, the State must prioritize the recovery of national identity in the areas of influence of the GAORs, as well as the population's confidence in public institutions.

Therefore, any strategy to solve this problem - under a unified approach - must consider integrated and multisectoral action within the framework of the following phases: (1) preparation of the force and multisectoral efforts, (2) intervention (military control of the territory), (3) consolidation (institutional control of the territory), and (4) stabilization (which includes the recovery and normalization of the population's activities). In this sense, to achieve the desired end state, the eviction and eradication of the GAOR, particularly Structure-48, is a priority, which requires a large-scale military operation, considered decisive to initiate the recovery of the area by the State.

**Conclusions**

On the one hand, the presence of the GAOR in the Putumayo region involves a series of transnational illicit activities that undermine state security

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33 Carpio, “Grupos Armados Organizados Residuales de las ex FARC...”, 27.
and affect the national identity of the inhabitants of these sectors. On the other hand, the lack of state presence has greatly influenced many of the inhabitants of the Putumayo area to be dazzled by what the GAOR offer and decide to get involved. At the same time, the villagers’ lack of knowledge and limited education has facilitated their subjugation by the GAOR. Finally, the advance of the illicit economy of these criminal groups has managed to expand beyond their borders, controlling sectors and consolidating their presence in the imaginary of the communities, by offering them a lucrative economic activity in contrast to what the State offers them.

**Recommendations**

In the first place, considering the extension, lushness and remoteness of this area of the Peruvian Amazon, it would be advisable that the capacities of the Amazon Operational Command be reinforced so that it can activate two Joint Detachments in the northeastern border. Likewise, the Joint Command of the Armed Forces should evaluate the activation of a Special Command duly equipped (radars, drones, drones, etc.) and framed within a unified strategy, being necessary the political decision and the multisectoral synergy. All of this with the objective of eradicating the various threats to national security that have been occurring in this area, as well as exercising adequate control and surveillance of the borders.

Secondly, the dominance of Structure-48 and Structure-1 in the area must be limited, which requires decisive coordination and support among neighboring countries affected by the presence of those groups. Last but not least, the needs of vulnerable populations must be addressed, as education, health and access to technologies will provide significant opportunities for the recovery and development of these communities. To achieve this, it is essential: (1) political will and decision, (2) the support of the population, (3) technological support, (4) international collaboration, (5) multisectoral action at the regional level, and (6) real compliance with the Living Borders Policy. Without them, the progress of the military effort would only be momentary.
About the author:

Manolo Eduardo Villagra is a Lieutenant Colonel of the Peruvian Army, Master in Military Sciences by the Superior School of War of the Peruvian Army, Master in Management and Technological Innovation by the Scientific and Technological Institute of the Peruvian Army, Master in Education Sciences by the Enrique Guzmán National University, as well as a Bachelor in Business Administration by the San Agustín National University. He has also completed a Diploma in Security and National Defense at the National University of Callao.