Mapping Strategies: Challenges and Reflections on Drug Trafficking and Terrorism in the VRAEM 2023

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Summary

Addressing the deep-rooted problem of drug trafficking in the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys (VRAEM), this article examines the complex interaction between criminal organizations and the self-styled Terrorist Organization Militarized Communist Party of Peru Marxist Leninist Maoist, mainly Xiist (MPCP - MLM - PX). Its objective is to analyze the strategies implemented by the Special Command of the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys (CEVRAEM) to dismantle the terrorist central committee and sever links with drug trafficking. The methodology employed fuses a hermeneutic and documentary review, complemented with the professional experience of the actors in the area, providing a comprehensive and critical view of the complex reality of the VRAEM. This analysis seeks to offer not only a detailed understanding of the current situation, but also to suggest comprehensive approaches involving governmental, social and economic efforts to confront this challenge.

Keywords: Terrorism, Related Crimes, Illicit Drug Trafficking, National Security, National Development.

Introduction

The scourge of drug trafficking is deeply rooted in the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys, a region where the international demand for cocaine hydrochloride, derived from coca leaves, generates a complex network of challenges. This symbiotic interaction between the criminal organizations dedicated to drug trafficking and the self-styled Terrorist Militarized Militarized Organization Communist Party of Peru Maoist Marxist Leninist Communist Party of Peru, mainly Xiist (MPCP-MLM-PX), subjects the region to fear and intimidation, obstructing the participation of investment and development.¹ In this context, the population, mostly Andean migrants,

is involved in the planting of coca leaf, an essential component for cocaine production. The economic and social realities, combined with these complex dynamics, trigger an ongoing struggle.

In response, the State has tasked the Special Command of the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys (CEVRAEM) to lead military operations and actions to disrupt the terrorist organization’s central committee, undermine itscombative capacity and break the nefarious links with the Illicit Drug Trafficking (TID). In this critical context, CEVRAEM positions itself as a bulwark against the complexity rooted in the alliance between drug trafficking and terrorism. Its strategic work seeks to unravel the complex layers of this web, confronting the deep roots that feed this regional problem and proposing a comprehensive approach to address it.

**Drug Trafficking in the VRAEM: An Integral Perspective on a Complex Reality**

For decades, the persistent problem of drug trafficking in the VRAEM has taken root in Peruvian society. It has grown out of the planting and cultivation of coca leaf. Although this leaf is an integral part of Andean culture with cultural and religious uses, criminal organizations exploit it for cocaine production for export. Initially, Colombian cartels served as intermediaries in this process, but with their decline, Mexican cartels have taken their place. The VRAEM region covers five departments, ten provinces and 69 districts, with a population of approximately 467,000 people, representing 1.6% of the country’s total.

The terrorist organization Shining Path (SP), after the capture of its leaders in the 1990s, downgraded its ideology to the self-styled MPCP-ML-PX, with the Quispe Palomino brothers assuming leadership. This formation,

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formerly characterized by its communist ideology, degenerated into a
family clan associated with local organizations dedicated to drug trafficking
and other illicit activities.

The SP presence in the VRAEM inherited a history of bloody violence. After
the capture of its historic leader Abimael Guzman Reynoso, alias “Gonzalo”,
Oscar Ramirez Durand, alias “Feliciano”, took control of the region,
inflicting brutal violence on native communities and population centers
until his capture in July 1999\(^4\). In this context, the Quispe Palomino brothers
emerged, adopting a different strategy, approaching the peasant population
by protecting the planting of coca leaf and the commercialization of illicit
crops\(^5\). They seek to present themselves as facilitators of local economic
growth and generators of local livelihoods, while portraying the forces of
law and order as obstacles to their activities.

This symbiosis between terrorism and drug trafficking in the VRAEM
has unleashed a series of related crimes, such as trafficking in controlled
chemicals, timber, arms, human trafficking and corruption of officials.
Therefore, the complexity of this situation requires comprehensive
strategies that address both the root of the problem and its ramifications,
involving governmental, social and economic efforts to effectively combat
this adversity\(^6\).

\(^5\) Marta Gonzales, et al, “Problemática del Valle de los ríos Apurímac, Ene y Mantaro: ...”
\(^6\) Manolo Eduardo, “El VRAEM: Propuesta de Estrategia Para la Mitigación de las Amenazas”,
index.php/recide/article/view/115
Of the 69 districts that make up the VRAEM, 18 have areas of coca cultivation. Of these, 9 districts concentrate 87% of the cultivation: Pichari and Kimbiri in Cusco; Vizcatán del Ene in Junín; and Canayre, Llochegua, Sivia, Santa Rosa, Samuragi and Anco in Ayacucho.

**Drug Trafficking-Related Crimes and Challenges for Sustainable Development**

The vast region comprising the VRAEM stands out for its rich biodiversity and agricultural potential. Despite having climates conducive to legal crops such as coffee and cocoa, the presence of the third crop, coca leaf, stands out due to its illicit nature and its link to cocaine production. According to Waldo Mendoza and Janneth Leyva, 84.2% of the gross value of agricultural production in the basins related to coca leaf in the VRAEM comes from these three crops, with coca accounting for 55.3%, coffee for 16.6% and cocoa for 12.3%. This apparently fertile scenario contrasts with the social and economic reality of the region.

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7 Defensoría del Pueblo, “Abordaje de la lucha contra la corrupción en el VRAEM: Análisis de los instrumentos de política pública y de gestión regional del VRAEM”, (2022), [https://www.defensoria.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Informe-de-Adjunt%C3%ADa-Abordaje-de-la-lucha-contra-la-corrupci%C3%B3n-en-el-Vraem.pdf](https://www.defensoria.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Informe-de-Adjunt%C3%ADa-Abordaje-de-la-lucha-contra-la-corrupci%C3%B3n-en-el-Vraem.pdf)
Although it has tourist potential with its natural beauty and the richness of its native communities, the poverty and underdevelopment figures are alarming.\(^8\) The lack of infrastructure in critical sectors such as education, health, housing and transportation reveals a stark and contradictory picture.

The presence of organizations dedicated to drug trafficking not only distorts the economy, but also fosters related crimes that profoundly affect society; the transition of farmers to coca leaf cultivation, in search of quick profits, generates economic informality and money laundering.\(^9\) These organizations also create financial entities with illicit funds, exacerbating the complexity of the problem.

Human trafficking, a nefarious by-product of this situation, is a modern manifestation of slavery; women from poor strata are deceived and forced into labor or sexual exploitation, violating human rights; children do not escape this reality, being used in coca fields or as “mules” in drug transportation. Another worrying component is the trafficking of chemical inputs and controlled products, essential for cocaine\(^10\) production; in this context, the corruption of the authorities in charge of their control facilitates this illicit activity.\(^11\) And it is here where the National Superintendence of Customs and Tax Administration (Sunat) should regulate these inputs since 2012, but its effectiveness has been questioned.

An even more serious aspect is the naturalization of illicit activities in the minds of local inhabitants; thus, for many VRAEM residents, participating

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9 Defensoría del Pueblo, “Abordaje de la lucha contra la corrupción en el VRAEM: Análisis de los instrumentos de política pública y de gestión regional del VRAEM”, (2022), [https://www.defensoria.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Informe-de-Adjunt%C3%A1%DA-Abordaje-de-la-lucha-contrala-corrupci%C3%B3n-en-el-Vraem.pdf](https://www.defensoria.gob.pe/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Informe-de-Adjunt%C3%A1%DA-Abordaje-de-la-lucha-contrala-corrupci%C3%B3n-en-el-Vraem.pdf)
10 Óscar Quispe, “Fracasó control de insumos químicos que van al tráfico de drogas”, Perú 21 (30 de mayo de 2023), [https://peru21.pe/politica/fracaso-control-de-insumos-quimicos-que-van-al-trafico-de-drogas-sunat-mininter-vicente-romero-noticia/](https://peru21.pe/politica/fracaso-control-de-insumos-quimicos-que-van-al-trafico-de-drogas-sunat-mininter-vicente-romero-noticia/)
in illegal activities related to drug trafficking is not seen as something outside the law, but as a normal activity necessary to support their families. This normalization further complicates the eradication of these deep-rooted problems in society.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, the VRAEM faces the crossroads between its natural resources, tourism potential and an economy distorted by drug trafficking, and addressing this problem requires not only military operations and actions by the Defense and Interior sectors, but comprehensive multisectoral strategies that address the underlying causes and promote sustainable development, education and institutional strengthening.\textsuperscript{13}

**Military Capabilities to Address National Security Threats in the VRAEM.**

According to Ministerial Resolution No 1411–2016–DE/CCFFAA of November 22, 2016, the strategic roles of the Armed Forces (FF. AA.) are:

1. Guarantee the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic; 2.
2. To participate in the internal order
3. To participate in national development
4. To participate in the National Disaster Risk Management System.
5. Participate in foreign policy

In this context, the organization of Operational Commands and Special Commands is strictly regulated, the latter being temporary bodies created specifically to face threats to national security; therefore, the allocation of forces and resources by the armed institutions is crucial to ensure the necessary level of readiness and fulfill these missions.\textsuperscript{14} According to the


\textsuperscript{13} Estado Peruano, Decreto Supremo Nº 006-2023-PCM, “Crean la Comisión Multisectorial de naturaleza permanente denominada ‘VRAEM Productivo’ “, Plataforma Digital Única (13 de enero de 2023), https://www.gob.pe/institucion/minam/normas-legales/3839551-0006-2023-pcm

\textsuperscript{14} Ministerio de Defensa, “Resolución Ministerial Nº 1411–2016–DE, que aprueba los roles estratéxicos de las Fuerzas Armadas con sus correspondientes definiciones y acciones estratégicas”, (2016).
Military Campaign Plan CEVRAEM-2023, this is a multifaceted entity with ground, air, naval and special forces capabilities; therefore, these components are essential to dismantle the central committee, neutralize the combative capacity of the terrorist organization and, in addition, break the links between this organization and those dedicated to the TID.

In the ground dimension, the presence of four large units, such as the 2nd Infantry Brigade, the 31st Infantry Brigade, the 33rd Infantry Brigade and the Combat Engineering Group, enables the execution of various missions. These include reconnaissance and combat operations, support to Special Forces, control of internal order, military actions during risks and disasters, as well as support to development through the maintenance of communication routes by Military Engineering units.

The naval component, on the other hand, is organized in river control units with Marine Infantry Platoons and combat support weapons. Its mission encompasses territorial and river control, with capabilities for river combat and search and rescue. It also plays a crucial role in supporting the community during hazards and disasters. The air component, which operates both fixed and rotary wings, provides essential support, from close air support missions to special operations, including insertions, extractions and deception operations. Their role is critical to the success of surface operations; they also perform intelligence and surveillance tasks, as well as reconnaissance. Likewise, the Special Forces component, with contingents assigned annually by the military institutes, composes reconnaissance and special combat groups. These groups carry out direct action, special reconnaissance and counter-terrorism actions, being key pieces in the fight against the terrorist organization. Therefore, CEVRAEM’s operational capabilities are an integral amalgam that seeks to effectively address the complex threats to national security in the region.

Conclusions

1. The complex interconnections between drug trafficking, terrorism and socioeconomic challenges in the VRAEM reveal the metamorphosis of cultural coca planting into an instrument for organized crime. This association has generated a series of problems, from economic distortion to the proliferation of related illicit activities, requiring comprehensive solutions that address both the root causes and the manifestations of the problem.

2. Despite the lush natural wealth and potential for tourism, the VRAEM presents a stark reality of poverty and underdevelopment. Illicit activities, especially drug trafficking, have hampered sustainable development efforts. This sharp contrast between the abundance of resources and the persistent lack of progress underscores the urgency of comprehensive approaches that address not only the symptoms, but also the roots of this complex problem.

3. The Armed Forces, led by CEVRAEM, play a crucial role in national security. Their comprehensive approach, encompassing ground, air, naval and special forces capabilities, reflects a serious commitment. However, the long-term solution to the reality of the VRAEM cannot be achieved through military action alone. The challenge lies in balancing operational and intelligence strategies with multi-sectoral approaches that foster real positive and sustainable social change in the region.

About the author

Oscar Luis Calle Pérez is Major General of the Peruvian Army (PA), Doctor in Administration, Specialized master’s in finance (EADA - Spain), master’s in Business Administration with mention in General Management, master’s in Public Management, master’s in Strategic Planning and Decision Making, bachelor’s degree in Military Sciences, International Business Diploma in Finance, Diploma in Defense Policies in the Framework of the National Reality, Diploma in Human Resources and Diploma in Defense and National
Security. He served as Alternate Delegate to the Inter-American Defense Board and Advisor on Hemispheric Security to the Peruvian Delegation to the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington DC. He was also General Commander of the 33rd Infantry Brigade, Director of the Infantry School, and Director of the Parachute School of the EP. He is a collaborator of the Peruvian Army Center for Strategic Studies (CEEEP). He currently holds the position of Joint Chief of Staff of the VRAEM Special Command.