Legitimacy as the center of gravity in Hybrid warfare:

Notes from the Colombian Battlefield

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These notes from the fields summarise a presentation on the topic of legitimacy, understood as the center of gravity (CoG), in hybrid warfare.[2] In my view this specific way of understanding the CoG was a key to our success in the Colombian war. We developed several ideas and techniques around the concept of CoG. According to my research and analysis[3] there are three types of hybrid war that take place on distinct battlefields:

1) Maoist, also called fourth generation war: internal insurgents struggle for political power using time as a main variable without the direct intervention of a foreign power.

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[2] Presentation at the international workshop 'Hybrid Warfare: New Concepts for Canadian Armed Forces' organised by Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard and Philippe Dufort, Canadian Forces College, Toronto, Canada, October 17th, 2016.

[3] General Ospina previously published some ideas included in this paper, see General Carlos Ospina Ovalle and Thomas Marks, ''Colombia: Changing Strategy amidst the Struggle,'' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 25, 2 (2014).

2)   Modern hybrid warfare: the goals move beyond those of Maoism and combine struggle over internal political power and national interests such as conquering territories of foreign countries as Russia did in Ukraine. This type is also called the Gerasimov Doctrine.

3)   Unrestricted warfare: This type introduces worldwide unethical and criminal methods to face the superior power of an adversary such as the United States of America, blunting the technological superior war approach (ex: ISIS, China).[4]

I will focus on Mao's doctrine in the case of the Colombian war. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) used the Vietnamese variant of Mao's doctrine called ''interlocking war''. In this variant, the three phases of war run simultaneously.[5] These phases seek the conjunction of a military offensive and a general uprising of the populace. Of course, time is a prevalent variable and contributes in changing the objectives of war when necessary. In Colombia, the FARC launched the war of movement phase in 1996.[6] From 1964 onwards, they used time available for mobilizing peasants to fight and overcome the asymmetry with government forces. For this purpose, seasoned guerrillas turned existing social, political and economic grievances into an adequate narrative to do so.

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[4] See Colonels Quiao Li and Wang Siang Sui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).

[5] In Vietnam, the guerrilla followed Mao's doctrine for fighting a ''People's War'', but it was slightly modified by the influence of General Vo Nguyen Giap. Like Mao (and Clausewitz before him), Giap understood the primacy of political aims. See the Article Lieutenant Colonel William O. Staudenmaier ''Vietnam, Mao, and Clausewitz,'' *Parameters* VII, no. 1 (1977).
https://www.clausewitz.com/bibl/Staudenmaier-Mao-OCR.pdf

[6] The threat reached a new level in 1996 with the advent of mobile warfare, whereby large units sought to neutralize the military in an effort to seize power and institute a Marxist-Leninist regime. Unlike Vietnam, what followed was a regaining of the strategic initiative by the government and a decimation of the insurgent threat. While accomplished with US assistance, Colombian leadership and strategy drove all efforts from start to finish. See Ospina and Marks, "Colombia: Changing Strategy amidst the Struggle."

Clausewitz's center of gravity applied to Colombia

In his work *On War*, Clausewitz defined the CoG as "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act."[7] In Books VI and VII, Clausewitz says: "A center of gravity is always found where the mass is concentrated most densely providing coherence." Providing coherence has different interpretations. The traditional clausewitzian school understands mass concentrated as a coherence generating strength. CoG is located normally in the battlefield.[8] This concept is used in conventional war. The second school of thought understands mass concentrated as a coherence coming from a point of confluence where gravitational forces converge. Insurgencies use this type of CoG.[9]

In Vietnam, the United States used the traditional clausewitzian understanding of CoG. Accordingly, the US understood the Center of gravity as enemy forces —that is, the Viet Cong.[10] The Soviets repeated the same mistake in Afghanistan. The objective was to destroy the Mujahideen, which was a huge strategic flaw. In both cases, primary state actors saw strength as the CoG, ignoring the relationship between the people, the state and its legitimacy. Then how can we think of another way to link the CoG with the State in complex conflicts or what we came to know as hybrid warfare?

The state should be considered as the point of confluence of gravitational forces. These gravitational forces are civil society, territory and sovereignty. The state hosts these three forces together and their relationship is based on acceptance, approval and cooperation. If this relation works in a smooth way, it is what we call legitimacy. As a consequence, we decided to consider legitimacy as our CoG. After 2000-2001, we adapted the second clausewitzian school of thought regarding the CoG in Colombia. This changed the whole situation of our war and contributed to the defeat of the FARC. The Colombian State had to maintain that smooth relation with those gravitational forces in order to protect the CoG.

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[7] Quoted in DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. Joint Publication 1-02. 2008.

[8] See: Joe Strange and Richard Iron, *Understanding centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities* www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/cog2.pdf visited March 10, 2017.

[9] See: Antulio J Echavarria II, *Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine Again*, (US Army War College, 2002).

[10] See: Harry Summers, *On Strategy: Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Presidio Press, 1995).

Within this reformulated concept of CoG, we planned our strategy taking advantage of opportunities coming from the actual situation. For example, in many Colombian provinces, we considered local security issues, low local economic production and poor people's welfare as overlapping problems.[11] Nevertheless, local security is considered the basic problem from this point of view. Without local security, legitimacy collapses since nothing can be achieved. Moreover, we can say that the value of local security is a priority to the strength of state legitimacy. Therefore, if you have strong local security, you will have strong legitimacy. Furthermore, you have to consider local security as one of the two basic elements since local economy is also essential. When both elements come together, they provide trust in the State. This trust prevents any popular mobilization in favour of the insurgency due to the acceptance of government policies and the rise of confidence in them among the peasantry.

Legitimacy is, therefore, a key concept in fighting insurgency especially in a country with security problems like Colombia. In fact, local security was absolutely absent in many places before the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez in 2002. A great number of local municipalities were turned into grey areas with thousands of kidnappings and murders. These were commonplace due to a lack of authority. The legitimacy of local mayors and governors was undermined due to this flagrant absence of security. These areas were either influenced or controlled by the FARC or by other illegal armed groups. There were several consequences linked to this insecurity in Colombia. For instance, this lack of security in Colombia brought the country to be ranked 14th on the Failed States Index of 2003 published by *Foreign Policy* and the think tank Fund for Peace.[12] Two of the twelve main indicators of this ranking highlighted the problem of legitimacy of the state and the uneven development. The national economy was in fact suffering as a consequence these unfortunate circumstances. Abandoned

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[11] In fact, in Social science are named as "Root of the Conflict."

[12] The Fund for Peace (FFP), a non-profit research and educational institution, annually released the Failed States Index since 2003. This is a comprehensive ranking of "178 nations based on their levels of stability and the pressures they face" meant to forecast violence for policymakers. This index is better known, since 2005, as the Fragile States Index. According to the FFP, a fragile state means: A state that is fragile has several attributes, and such fragility may manifest itself in various ways. Nevertheless, some of the most common attributes of state fragility may include: '' The loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; The erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions; An inability to provide reasonable public services; The inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community. '' See http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/faq-06-state-fragility

areas were about to be transformed into insurgent bases or liberated territories. So adapting the CoG under new terms and relocating it as the cornerstone of our planning, was critical for us in order to develop our strategy.

Previously, we considered the CoG as the strength of the enemy generated from drug trafficking. We directed our efforts against this strength for many years. We were fighting an insurgency with the traditional clausewitzian interpretation of coherence generated from strength. Thus, we decided that we had to make a change in all senses with a new understanding of our CoG that would allow a whole of government approach. We started analyzing the state and its legitimacy as the new CoG in relationship with civil society. We needed to maintain a smooth relationship despite all the problems created by a war inspired by Maoist Vietnamese doctrines. We built what some analysts now call a 'people-centric' strategy. We based this new strategy on the implementation of local security as a base for social programs of the government. This is not equivalent to 'Nation Building,' but rather to 'Nation Reinforcing' because political institutions have been traditionally strong in Colombia. We adopted a comprehensive approach with this idea in mind. To implement local security meant developing an overall plan with different campaigns in the various fields of state power. Each campaign tried to counter the lines of efforts developed by the insurgency in Colombia.[13] Each sought to always bear in mind that without security, developing any other plan for rural areas is useless, to the point that investment in these places would be like pouring money into a bottomless barrel. In other terms at the end of the day we were trying to aim at democracy through security, but with a legitimate security concept limited by people's rights.

In this plan, we did not declare war on anybody; we did not declare war on any Colombian. Our political idea was to conquer democracy through security. As time progressed, political rivalries (including members of the current government in 2017) and FARCs' counter-narrative expressed through different means distorted this idea. Some tried to discredit our Democratic Security Policy and to present it as an

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[13] These campaigns were directed to counter aspects as Farc's narrative, its own strategy and its mobilization efforts in the rural areas.

indiscriminate repressive action against the people. However, our main goal was to protect the CoG[14] in preserving the trust, confidence and support of all Colombians.[15]

Three Military Sub-campaigns

The military campaign aspect of this plan had three main sub-campaigns. The first campaign aimed to protect the people, their property and national infrastructures. It was based on three basic programs at the local level. The first program was called *soldados campesinos* or peasant soldiers to protect the villages.[16] The FARCs destroyed at least 10% of local municipalities in Colombia. They assassinated or kidnapped many of their inhabitants. Peasant Soldiers was a very successful program. They were not armed peasants such as 'Ronda campesina' or self-defence patrols in Guatemala. We did not want to inspire vigilante type organizations such as the also illegal AUC.[17] In fact, peasant soldiers were locals in specific villages and recruited on a voluntary basis to become Colombian soldiers. The Army trained them in a military facility. Then, they returned under the command of a professional cadre and as a unit under the command of the same training battalion protecting their villages. This program insured local security into towns that never had a military presence before. Bonding with their local

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[14] The election of Alvaro Uribe as president in May 2002 signalled a profound shift in Colombian domestic politics as he made combating the insurgents the overriding priority and defining objective of the Colombian government. Therefore, Democratic security policy (DSP) was the centerpiece of President Uribe's strategy to end the chronic violence and re-establish central government control in Colombia. See the 2013 written testimony of Adam Isacson, Senior Associate for Regional Security Policy for the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) titled "The Human Rights Landscape in Colombia," https://www.wola.org/files/131020_tlhrc_isacson.pdf and Ann Mason, ''Colombia's Democratic Security Agenda: Public Order in the Security Tripod,'' *Security Dialogue* 34, no. 4 (2003): pp. 391-409.

[15] During elections for President in 2006 Álvaro Uribe received 60% of the votes. His closest rival received 20%. People reelected Uribe due to the confidence and trust he inspired after 4 years as a president.

[16] According to *Semana*, a Colombian weekly magazine, villages as Torirbio in the province of Cauca in the southern region of the country suffered more than 100 attacks since 1979.

[17] The United Self Defense Forces of Colombia or *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), was a right wing umbrella paramilitary organization in Colombia active from April 1997 to 2006. The AUC targeted left wing insurgents, left wing activists, indigenous persons, trade unionists, human rights advocates, religious leaders, and rural populations they believed to be collaborating with or supporting guerrillas. The AUC's tactics include displacement, kidnapping, extortion, massacres and assassinations. Tens of thousands of attacks involving these tactics were attributed to the AUC during its official existence. See Stanford University '' Mapping Militant Organizations,'' https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/85

community, peasant soldier contributed to Army intelligence based on the flow of information coming from friends and relatives.

We also developed another plan, called plan Meteoro, to clear roads of illegal roadblocks. This allowed commerce and tourism to flow again. This plan contributed to the reopening of a good many roads practically abandoned or restricted due to insecurity in the 1990s. The peasant economy based on small business such as fruits and food selling to vehicles drivers and passengers came to life again, fostering local economy. Thus, what did we achieve in this first sub-campaign?

First, we achieved people's trust. People started to trust the government for the first time in many years. Another consequence was the recovery of our national economy. The growth of the GDP in 1999 was less than 1%; in 2009, it was almost 8%. The Colombian government gained legitimacy with the protection of citizens, cooperatives, national infrastructures and private property. It was the way of winning as they say 'the hearts and minds' of the people in Colombia. Stimulated by this new security, Colombians began to react negatively to the FARC.[18] Nonetheless, improving the economy at the local and national level was not enough.

We needed a second sub-campaign to reduce FARC's military effectives and support structures. This military sub-campaign peaked in 2008 and in six years the FARC's effectives dropped about 50%, from 20 000 to 10 000. As we forced FARC to withdraw from the surroundings of the cities and towns, they had to retreat deep into the jungle.[19] According to their internal communications, FARCs claimed to need more

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[18] In 1999, 13 million Colombians participated in the *No Más* protests throughout cities in the country, demonstrating the public's frustration with guerrilla groups. In a similar protest in February 2008, millions of people in 104 major cities globally and throughout Colombia protested against the FARC. They marched saying, "No more kidnappings! No more lies! No more deaths! No more FARC!" This march was organized through social media in an event entitled, "A million voices against the FARC" and displayed dissatisfaction with the FARC on a domestic and international level. See "Mapping Militant Organizations'' by Stanford University,
http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/89

[19] According to James Bargent from InSight Crime: "With defeat after defeat on the battleground, the loss of their spiritual leader and some of their most skilled and experienced commanders, large scale desertions, and rock bottom popular support, the FARC had lost a great deal of power in just six years'' See the 2014 article: James Bargent, "The FARC 2002- Present: Decapitation and Rebirth,'' *InSight Crime*, May 26, 2014.
http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/farc-2002-present-decapitation-rebirth

than five years to bring their organization back where it had been, which means they had no more hope on the military side. That was our main achievement because we brought tranquility, stability and peace in the majority of the Colombian territory. From that moment on, the FARC adapted and shifted from military actions to political actions.

Our third sub-campaign aimed at neutralizing FARC's plans and projects. The best way to do so was to target leadership that felt, so far, very secure in the deeps of the Amazon jungle. For this purpose, special units prepared with some external support and began targeting most important leaders. In a period of a few years, all of them were out of combat. A new generation of leaders with less will to fight and fearing this program emerged at the head of the FARC. This new generation of FARC leaders understood that the war was unwinnable and that they probably would be next on the list of Special Forces targets. Wisely, they decided to quit. Besides that, using the same methods in daring rescue operations, we liberated all soldiers held as hostages for years and even decades. That was another blow to the guerrilla's moral. As a result, kidnapping rates of Colombians dropped almost by 90%.[20]

So what did we achieve? By not declaring war, but by coordinating a strategy that combined politics, social interventions and military force, we disrupted FARCs' plans in a definitive way. After, they began the Peace Process and reintegration to normal life,[21] a situation developed in details by General Puentes in this special issue. A correct assessment of the CoG allowed a correct planning in all the fields (especially the political and economic) and the application of a military campaign with the idea of recovering democracy through security. This was a great success. This takes me to three basic conclusions based on the Colombian experience.

First, in the evolutionary context that characterized the Colombian hybrid war, political legitimacy should be considered as the CoG. Second, political strengths like local security and economic production should be enforced in order to protect

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[20] The Colombian military operation *Operación Jaque* in July 2008 leading to the rescue of 15 hostages, including former Colombian presidential candidate Íngrid Betancourt, remains one of the highs of Alvaro Uribe's presidency and perhaps one of the biggest blow to the FARCs.

[21] According to the last developments of the peace process, President Santos' government granted unimaginable concessions to the FARC in exchange for demobilizing former insurgents at the cost of hurting Colombian democracy.

legitimacy as the CoG. Third, in this type of environment, there is normally a contest between a CoG derived from strength and a CoG derived from legitimacy. The Colombian experience showed us that the second one, that is, legitimacy, has the greatest possibility of success.