

Special forces or engineering corps: which role for military in drug war?

by Gretchen Small

The government of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori has proposed that anti-narcotics and anti-narco-terrorist operations be turned over to a specialized police/military force, which will be U.S. trained, paid, and led. Make no mistake: This sweeping plan will do nothing to end the flood of mind-destroying drugs targeting the youth of the world, including the United States. But, it really is not intended to.

The Fujimori plan dramatizes the ongoing policy debate over the direction the military should take in Ibero-American nations, in response to the cancerous growth of the drug economies and their armies. This article will look at the approach behind the Fujimori plan and two contrary approaches, recently put forward in Peru.

National gendarmerie

The Fujimori plan conforms to U.S.-designed blueprints for how to eliminate the military as an institution, and replace it with U.S.-directed paramilitary police forces, as argued in the 1990 book, *The Military and Democracy; The Future of Civil-Military Relations in Latin America*. The book, whose broad anti-military and pro-liberal tenets were reviewed in *EIR*'s Jan. 11 issue, summarizes the work of a U.S. government-sponsored multi-year project on Ibero-American military strategy and structure. The U.S. Agency for International Development provided funding for the project; State Department officials advised it; the U.S. Army Southern Command based in Panama participated in it.

On narcotics, the project participants' only interest is that military participation in anti-drug operations be limited to what can be carried out by "specially trained national gendarmerie," which operate "within a context of international co-operation."

The arguments for the "national gendarmerie" approach are straightforward: Their purpose is not to crush the narcotics empire which threatens all civilized life in the Americas, but rather, to ensure that the drug crisis not serve to catalyze political support for strong national militaries as a crucial part of securing peace in the region. The anxiety over the potential for renewed military prestige and strength extends even to the title of the chapter on narcotics, "The Threat of New Missions: Latin American Militaries and the Drug

War." The authors, American University professors Louis Goodman and Johanna Mendelson, state from the outset that their concern is limited to the question: "Should the military, both in the U.S. and in Latin American nations, be used to interdict and control illegal narcotics?"

Eradicating the narcotics trade from the Americas is thus discarded as an option; only the limited objective of interdiction and *control* of drugs is assumed as the goal. The authors also appear willing to simply write off part of the region, criticizing such U.S. operations as Blast Furnace and Snow Cap, for example, not for failing, but for "encouraging unchecked military action in *basically uncontrollable territory*" (emphasis added).

Countering Brazilian military doctrine

In fact, the drug crisis is hardly addressed. Instead, most of the chapter attacks the national security and development doctrine associated with the Brazilian military—because it legitimizes military involvement in nation-building. The influence of Brazilian doctrine since 1964 exemplifies the "danger" involved in activating the military against the drug trade, they argue. "The proposal to militarize the war on drugs is the latest chapter in a debate . . . about whether military missions should be expanded from the traditional role of external security to a 'new professionalism' of internal security.

"The 1964 Brazilian elaboration of a national security doctrine, which formalized military professional responsibility to respond to internal security threats and to play a role in national development matters, has profoundly influenced debates in other militaries. . . . The Brazilian redefinition of the professional military role—to include national security and development activities—has been central to intramilitary debates."

Since the mid-1980s, however, the United States has ceased to encourage the military to carry out civic action and "nation-building tasks," they wrote. This has helped reduce the influence of the Brazilian doctrine. They cite the case of Guatemala, where the military has accepted a "national stability doctrine" which allows the military to concern itself only with *form* of government (democracy), and not the exis-

tence of the nation as a whole. Similar shifts are occurring in Argentina.

The authors complain that in reaction to the drug crisis, the specter has arisen again of an active military role in the task of securing national development and security—to them, apparently a greater threat than a narco-terrorist seizure of power! “The dangers of the drug war as a military mission are obvious . . . likely necessitating the expansion of military intelligence operations; it would blur the line between appropriate and inappropriate domains for military professional actions; it would expand the managerial roles played by the military in society; and it would increase the role military men play in national politics and political decision-making.

“Involving Latin American armed forces in the drug war threatens traditional concepts of military professionalism in the region. . . The preferred solution, of course, would be to treat narcotics trafficking as a police problem; to train special gendarmerie to control it; and to restrict military missions to external security matters,” they conclude.

Greater military role needed

The “national gendarmerie” approach has dominated most official thinking as to the appropriate military role vis-à-vis the drug problem. The recurring flaw in all such “special forces” approaches is the reduction of the military aspects of anti-drug operations to only that which pertains to overtly military confrontation with narco-terrorist and trafficking forces per se.

But the depth of penetration by the drug trade of the economy, physical geography, and institutional fabric of the Andean region in particular, foredooms any such “special forces.” No matter how many soldiers give their lives battling the narco-terrorist apparatus, the drug trade will not be defeated as long as governments continue implementing liberal economic policies which demand drug profits be given ever more freedom over the economy.

To succeed, military operations must be designed as part of a global *nation-building* policy, including economic policies centered on developing national productive capabilities, at the expense of international financial interests. Consider the difference between two approaches to the drug crisis recently put forward in Peru, distinct from the Fujimori proposal.

According to Gen. Francisco Morales Bermúdez (ret.), the time has come to restructure the Peruvian military entirely. According to a report in *Expresso* daily of Feb. 1, Morales Bermúdez has proposed that equipment and training for the Armed Forces should be scaled down to what is needed to fight the “internal enemy” on the enemy’s terms. In his view, the military can succeed only if it be transformed into an almost irregular force, operating in the same manner as the narco-terrorist enemy: “deploy on foot, with mobile bases, in contact and in combination with skilled *ronderos* [minimally armed peasant self-defense squads]. . . . The Armed Forces

should blend in with the environment, with the peasants, with their customs.”

Although apparently differing from the approach advocated in *The Military and Democracy* in the insistence on the importance of the “internal enemy,” the Morales Bermúdez proposal would lead to the same result in practice: a significant reduction of the Armed Forces in size and capabilities.

A dramatically different approach was put forward by the Independent Solidarity Movement in the 1990 national elections in Peru. In its pamphlet, “Mercantilist Manifesto for an Industrial Peru,” the Solidarity Movement proposed that the Peruvian Army be expanded through the formation of “civil-military engineering battalions,” whose job would be to reestablish control over the whole national territory, by building several large infrastructure projects in abandoned, but resource-rich, regions. Such battalions could begin with the vital task of “building the roads which will end the isolation [of some regions] and eliminate the sanctuaries enjoyed by the narco-terrorists,” the “Mercantilist Manifesto” states; it goes on to propose that manpower for the battalions be provided through the activation of Peru’s compulsory military service.

Corps of military engineers proposed

A similar proposal was circulated in Colombia by the Andean Labor Party (PLAN), in a pamphlet entitled “Industrialize Colombia: The PLAN’s Program To Win the Peace.” The PLAN identified how Colombia’s backward transportation system, unmaintained roads, and decrepit or nonexistent railroads, provide the irregular armies of the narco-terrorists with a crucial advantage over the military in mobility of movement, as well as restricting the country’s economic development.

“The first step in developing the country will be to *double* the number of soldiers in the Armed Forces,” the PLAN wrote. “The number of men under arms should be 300,000, including members of the National Police. A special corps of Military Engineers will be created, whose role will be to plan and build the infrastructure which the country requires for national integration. The 150,000 men who enter the Armed Forces will be assigned, principally, to the Military Engineering Battalions which will be created. Thus, the mission of the Armed Forces will be broader: In addition to its capability for physical combat, it will have the capability to take control of reconquered areas and to construct the infrastructure (highways, bridges, etc.) necessary to integrate these areas into the national infrastructure.”

The U.S. State Department proposal turns civilians against the military, and assumes the permanence of the drug trade. The “engineering battalion” approach hands the military the capability to deal with the crisis it faces, while returning the military to its legitimate place in any serious republic—the role it played in the evolution of the United States—as one of the leading forces for national development.