SECURITY ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVES

Special Operations Forces in Low Intensity Conflict A Security Assistance Organization Commander's Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

An imperative for U.S. foreign and national security policies of the 1980's has been the need to address low intensity conflict (LIC) challenges which have steadily increased in number and complexity, with disturbing consequences for national interests. The decade began with El Salvador engulfed in insurgent strife, American diplomats captive in our Teheran embassy, and record levels of terrorist assaults on U.S. citizens and symbols. It is ending with prospects of Latin American narco-states, and a contracting U.S. defense establishment. The loss of U.S. basing and access rights, markets, and perhaps political influence is hardly compensated by a punitive raid on Libya and the ejection of several hundred Cubans and their influence from Grenada. The political-military outlook is uncertain.

The planned or actual use of U.S. military special operations forces (SOF) in most of these events, or for pending challenges, is probably suggestive of the nature of our developing policy responses for the decade of the 90's. The operational venue will be the Third World, and the missions assigned will likely be executed in the current doctrinal categories of LIC: combatting terrorism, peacetime contingency operations (a broad collection of responses by general purpose forces), peacekeeping, insurgency/counterinsurgency, and the probable additional category of counternarcotics. As a virtually omnipresent and often leading element of the application of the military instrument of U.S. national policy in a country/region, SOF in LIC merits our further serious consideration. Such employment is neither a panacea nor even sufficient in terms of pursuing strategic objectives. It must be carefully orchestrated with other military force and non-force tools, and with the economic, political, and informational instruments of national power projection into and within the LIC environment.

Two years as Chief of the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) in Peru, completed in June 1989, offered me an on-the-ground view of the non-combat applications of SOF in LIC. I gained a perspective on the problems and planning considerations confronting the U.S. Embassy's Country Team, the theater Commander-in-Chief (CINC), and the host nation, that may be of some value in the continuing dialog on appropriate SOF activities in LIC—the principal environment of challenge and opportunities for the next decade, as it has been in the recent past.

THE PERUVIAN CONTEXT: A LIC LABORATORY

It is quite easy to consider Peru as a set of problems with no clear solutions. The paradox of a democratically elected government with little remaining popular support is reinforced by the spectacle of its large military (180,000 – big for Latin America) routinely stymied or defeated by 6000 or so insurgents. In fact, in the nine years since the return to civilian rule, two unique insurgencies in Peru and narco-trafficking have grown to challenge all elements of government and the complex society, while the economy, human rights, essential infrastructure, effective political participation, and international regard for the state have all plunged.

As with any Third World country in distress, the roots of Peru's instability and the causes of internal violence are historical, varied, and complex. A difficult colonial experience, imposing geographical obstacles, racial discrimination, and oligarchic ruling patterns have led to 24 million largely poor people pursing a score of very different approaches to life in general, and to the resolution of grievances. Consensus on almost any issue is rare, elusive, and fleeting. It is an excellent environment for insurgent genesis, expansion, and consolidation.

Add to all this the largest Soviet hemispheric presence other than Cuba, the world's largest coca leaf production, a populist left-leaning regime consistently unwilling (and now unable) to meet external debt service payment obligations, and the prospect of a socialist government in April of 1990, and you have a world class challenge to democratic nation building and internal defense. The general approach of the U.S. has been to seek all possible common grounds to maintain useful bilateral relations while providing what foreign assistance the law allows. Ideally, the U.S. should continue to support democratic survival in Peru through multi-national means that further promising regional efforts at political and economic cooperation. Successes have been limited and the prognosis is only fair.

U.S. INTERESTS AND CONCERNS

Clearly, the survival of a democracy in Latin America is of value to the U.S. and its hemispheric allies, even with the many blemishes and immature stage of development of the Peruvian form. The bordering countries of Ecuador, Columbia, Brazil, Bolivia, and Chile are similarly concerned that a collapse puts them at risk due to the release of pressure upon the brutal Maoist style insurgency of *Sendaro Luminoso* (the Shining Path), the Latin Marxist insurgency of Tupac Amaru, and the Colombian, Peruvian, and other narco-traffickers who operate extensively in six or seven regions of the country. Additionally, the ascendancy to power of a committed socialist coalition, the military—by coup or cooperation—or either of the two insurgent groups (*Sendero Luminoso* being stronger, more systematic, and more patient), would make worse an already unenviable human rights record. Unfortunately for Peru, authoritarian regimes have been common, from the ancient Incas through the 300 years of Spanish rule, and through many military governments since independence in 1821.

COCA AND ECONOMICS

While Peru struggles through political violence, terrorism, and insurgency without evidence of improvement, the U.S. ultimately consumes over half of the country's illicit coca production in the form of street cocaine and the deadly crack derivative. Peru's government and present social structure may not survive another five years without major external assistance for counter-insurgency (COIN) and economic development. The U.S., in turn, is fearful of the social and economic costs of another five years of cocaine consumption at home. The concerns and resources of the respective countries are asymmetrical, the priorities for action are clearly different, and the basis for bilaterial and multilateral cooperation is weak. Approaches to solutions require different policy choices for both countries, and it is unclear if the next Peruvian government (in theory to be installed in July 1990) will be more capable or inclined to cooperate, whether leftist, socialist,

military, or center-right. Regardless, a long term commitment to support would be required, with infusions of large amounts of correctly targeted and controlled aid, plus a campaign plan (or several) that would challenge the abilities of every U.S. foreign affairs agency, DOD, and cooperating countries. Finally, in a multi-billion dollar equation where the demand side is dominant, working on the supply side is a difficult prospect at best.

Coca leaf, coca paste, cocaine base, and processed cocaine (on the increase) represent Peru's second most valuable export in dollar terms. Although only a small percent of profit returns to Peru, it sustains perhaps 1/2 million or more people. In a country with 60 percent unemployment or serious underemployment, this is a compelling activity. Arguably, if every coca plant died tomorrow (on the more than 1/2 million planted acres), the dislocations would be unbearable if not accompanied by substitute economic activity. This extends beyond those directly involved: narco-dollars supply most of the liquidity in Peru's economy, contrasted to the hyper-inflated and collapsing local currency. Those in the government structure who benefit through corruption are unlikely to support anything but a very gradual transition away from coca production. This dilemma deals a difficult hand to U.S. policymakers and those segments of Peruvian society appalled at increasing drug abuse and associated forms of violence. Since an immediate solution is impossible, we are seemingly left with the choice of beginning a long-term campaign, or abandoning supply side assaults on the cocaine industry in Peru. This decision will inevitably define the roles of many U.S. agencies in Peru, including DOD, and particularly those of SOF.

INTRODUCING INTERNAL DEFENSE CONCEPTS AND SKILLS THROUGH SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

In a rare coincidence, the three MAAG-Peru Officers during 1-1/2 of my two-year tour possessed solid SOF backgrounds with one from each U.S. military Service. We concluded early on that what we could offer was most needed by Peru's military: advice on small unit field operations, joint planning, horizontal coordination, COIN focus, and integrated support from psychological operations (PSYOP), and civil affairs (CA). Convincing the Peruvian military leadership at all levels of the utility of new technique development over new tools, and of addressing practical operational planning before developing new macro-level strategic schemes (at which the Peruvians excel), was at least as difficult as imagined. With excellent, sustained support from USCINCSOUTH and from all levels of the U.S. Army in particular, we engaged three Peruvian Services' special operations (or approximate equivalent) units in developing two year-long plans for bilateral exchanges. Beginning with our first tri-Service SOF Subject Matter Exchange (SMEE) on national level campaign planning, the momentum grew. Led in numbers and frequency by U.S. Army SOF support (special operations, aviation, PSYOP, CA, and Rangers), programs of SMEEs, small unit training exchanges in both countries, deployments for training, and SOF-focused joint/combined exercises in garrison and field, were all conducted.

The emphasis throughout was on reciprocation through bilateral exchange of experience and concepts, and consideration of practical problems and possible solutions. In a basically unfunded MAAG, due to Congressional and Executive debt-related sanctions on security assistance, a low cost/no cost approach was pursued wherever possible. Training opportunities for U.S. SOF are plentiful in Peru's deserts, the Andes Mountains, and waterways and dense jungles of the Amazon River system. Security and safety clearly limited and defined the possibilities, yet we satisfactorily conducted mountain training, parachuting, SCUBA, forest/jungle patrolling, small arms marksmanship, and tactical air support planning.

I am convinced that the value received by U.S. SOF, in terms of cultural/weapons familiarization, and technique exchange, was approximately equal to that received by the Peruvians. The understanding our SOF gained from combat experienced Peruvians in COIN and other military problems is professionally significant. However, without a consistent source of funding such as security assistance (or perhaps counter-narcotics), steady building upon previous

work is not possible. Our forces have other important priorities within USCINCSOUTH's theater, and in a sense must be applied where there are reliable friends and opportunities to exert effective influence.

Peru's Army is over 70 percent Soviet equipped, and the Peruvian Air Force is almost 50 percent Soviet supplied—on a cash, credit, or barter basis. Still, our training, education, planning, engineering, and logistical support techniques are greatly preferred, if offered on equal access and favorable financial terms. This, of course, is not the case due to debt sanctions and the minuscule amount of the worldwide security assistance budget available to South America.

ACHIEVING MUTUAL NATIONAL INTERESTS: Sequencing or Parallelism?

Peru is at once an anomaly in our SOF-in-LIC experience and, perhaps, the paradigm of the coming decade. The predominant U.S. policy interest appears to be attacking cocaine production that either occurs in Peru or derives from the vast coca fields. However, the overriding political-military problem for Peru's government, armed forces, police and society is the defeat, or at least control of the 9-1/2 year old insurgency. It has cost almost 20,000 lives, and perhaps 20 billion dollars in direct infrastructure damage throughout the country. How do we dovetail policies, and what is rational SOF utilization?

I believe strongly that without first assisting in internal defense/COIN, and maintaining the difficult commitment that entails, no progress is possible in counternarcotics. The Peruvian military needs and will accept even conditional assistance against the country-wide insurgency. They will not permit a significant U.S. military presence, but would likely accept limited advisory assistance (planning, logistics, civil affairs/civic action SOF, and conventional training) accompanied by rehabilitative funds. Conversely, if the current ineffective U.S. support to the small Peruvian police counternarcotics force is enlarged, and a strong SOF role develops, the military will become seriously obstructionist. Overall U.S.-Peruvian military, and perhaps political, relations will deteriorate.

The bitter irony here, is that the insurgents and narco-traffickers are generally found in the same areas and frequently cooperate in exchanging services; but they also occasionally set each other up, and can possibly be induced to turn on each other in a number of circumstances.

The optimum approach would be a Peruvian national level internal defense and development program, with a comprehensive, aggressive COIN campaign in the lead. Narco-trafficking would be part of the strategic and tactical targeting schemes because of its subversive assault on the society and corrosive effects on national sovereignty. This could only be attempted with generous security assistance and development funding, together with advisory, intelligence, and logistical support. The assistance roles of U.S. SOF would be based upon two of their primary mission areas: Foreign Internal Defense (FID) and strategic reconnaissance. Host nations military/police skills in both of these mission areas need a great deal of improvement and expansion.

The Peruvians must fight their war in their own ways, and we will occasionally disagree with this approach. However, if U.S. policy includes damaging coca production and supporting democratically elected governments as important goals, we can first support COIN in Peru (or Columbia, or Bolivia), and subsequently seek to work with the government and security forces against narco-trafficking. Or, more rationally and effectively, we can work simultaneously on both sets of problems, seeking to involve other nations in support of the effort. This is a political, not a military choice. However, we cannot work exclusively on counternarcotics; both countries would fail. The political and policy choices are difficult, and any decision to become involved will have serious financial, diplomatic, and human costs.

At the moment, our measures are awkwardly half-way. Policy instruments like SOF are generally constrained by U.S. laws from performing advisory functions in COIN, yet not from training host nation counternarcotics forces. We have been frustrated in our worldwide efforts by funding and lead agency issues, while the theater CINCs have identified the FID mission requirements and are attempting to obtain and apply tailored SOF and support assets. The log jam must soon be broken so that the force multiplication role of SOF trainers and advisors can be implemented among the military and police operators of friendly countries who battle with their insurgencies—and with our mutual drug problem.