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Fredy Leonardo Galindo García

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7361-5629>

fredy.galindo@buzonejercito.mil.co

Escuela de Derechos Humanos, DIH y Asuntos Jurídicos del Ejército,

Bogotá D.C., Colombia

Juan Carlos Aristizábal Murillo

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3690-3282>

juanaristizabalmurillo@cedoc.edu.co

Escuela Militar de Cadetes “General José María Córdova,” Bogotá D.C., Colombia

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The United Nations and 21st century security challenges in Colombia

Las Naciones Unidas y los retos de seguridad del siglo XXI en Colombia

Fredy Leonardo Galindo García

Escuela de Derechos Humanos, DIH y Asuntos Jurídicos del Ejército, Bogotá D.C., Colombia

Juan Carlos Aristizábal Murillo

Escuela Militar de Cadetes “General José María Córdova,” Colombia

ABSTRACT. Multifaceted 21st-century security challenges, such as terrorism, pandemics, illegal migration, and drug trafficking, permanently question the adequacy of both state and global organizations to guarantee general wellbeing, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. In this sense, the United Nations (UN) has received the brunt of the criticism despite its growing responsibilities, the complexity of the threats, and its decision-making structure's limitations. This paper examines the UN's effectiveness in addressing Colombia's major security challenges, suggesting that providing adequate assistance to build state capacity is key to reducing power vacuums that foster both deviant globalization and embryonic security challenges.

KEYWORDS: Colombia; foreign policy; international security; peaceful coexistence; state security; United Nations

RESUMEN. Los polifacéticos retos de seguridad del siglo XXI, como el terrorismo, las pandemias, la migración ilegal y el narcotráfico, cuestionan permanentemente la idoneidad de las organizaciones, tanto estatales como mundiales, para garantizar el bienestar general, el estado de derecho y la protección de los derechos humanos. En este sentido, la Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU) ha recibido la mayor parte de las críticas a pesar de sus crecientes responsabilidades, la complejidad de las amenazas y las limitaciones de su estructura de toma de decisiones. Este documento examina la eficacia de la ONU a la hora de abordar los principales retos de seguridad de Colombia, sugiriendo que proporcionar una asistencia adecuada para construir la capacidad del Estado es clave para reducir los vacíos de poder que fomentan tanto la globalización desviada como los retos de seguridad embrionarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: coexistencia pacífica; Colombia; Naciones Unidas; política exterior; seguridad del Estado; seguridad internacional

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CONTACT: Fredy Leonardo Galindo García ✉ fredy.galindo@buzonejercito.mil.co

Introduction

The past decade has seen the rapid development of new cross-border security challenges worldwide. These challenges have called into question the adequateness of both state and supranational organizations to guarantee general wellbeing, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. The United Nations (UN) has been the recipient of most criticism because of alleged elitism, bureaucracy, and ineffectiveness (Gold, 2004; Moore & Pubantz, 2017). However, the expansion of the UN's responsibilities, in addition to the complexity of current threats, and the enduring unwillingness of some countries to grant the UN and its related organizations more authority have hindered more positive results.

This article aims to assess the UN's effectiveness in dealing with security challenges in the 21st century, using the Colombian case. It posits that the origin of the most impending major security challenges is ungoverned spaces that foster deviant globalization –defined as the “ability to satisfy the demand for goods and services that are otherwise illegal or unavailable in the formal, licit economy” (Gilman et al., 2011, p. 3). Given that an UN-led robust global governance –explained as “the sum of the informal and formal values, norms, procedures, and institutions that help all actors, states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), civil society, transnational corporations (TNCs), and individuals to identify, understand and address trans-boundary problems” (Weiss, 2013, p. 2)– is most likely unattainable in the near future, the UN should emphasize its efforts on assisting fragile states, defined as “states that are failing, or at risk of failing, concerning authority, comprehensive service entitlements or legitimacy” (Stewart & Brown, 2010, p. 4), in troubled regions.

By using the UN architecture to foster effective state capacity building instead of reacting to emerging menaces, it may be possible to impede the growth of national threats across regions that may become global security challenges. The results of such an approach would be twofold. The UN would refocus into its core role of maintaining international peace and security, preventing all future conflicts, increasing its success and effectiveness ratio, acquiring desirable trust among the actors of the international system.

The intricacy of security challenges in the 21st century

The UN's role is multifaceted. Although created in 1945 with the purpose of “maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations, achieving international cooperation in solving international problems, and as a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends” (United Nations, 1945), the UN's role has expanded to include multiple dimensions of “protecting human rights, delivering humanitarian aid, promoting sustainable development, and upholding international law” (United Nations, 2018c). However, contrasting state geopolitical interests and divergent policy perspectives of other actors of the international system, such

as corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and civil society, have hindered the flow required by the UN to make adequate and opportune decisions for the common good (Carvajal, 2010; Domínguez Figueirido, 2009).

Its adequateness for modern times has been frequently debated because of the complexity of globalization-produced security challenges. Two considerations are at the core of this debate regarding the UN's effectiveness in dealing with security challenges in the 21st century. The first is related to the characterization of security—classically understood as “the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change perceived as hostile” (Buzan, 1991, p. 432)—and its main challenges. Security may be seen as a social construct related to the absence of fear, individual or group, and threat-survival capabilities within a determined context. Therefore, although security shares similarities within regions, it also differs between them. For instance, while Russia understands the “demonstration of military force in the course of exercises in the territories of states contiguous to the Russian Federation or its allies” (Russian Ministry of Defense, 2015) as a threat, NATO members understand these military exercises as a way to “test procedures and tactics, develop best practices, and identify areas for improvement” (NATO, 2019).

Thus, reaching an agreement on UN security priorities has been difficult. While some UN reports may identify “the use of military force, states under stress, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and terrorism as the four major threats and challenges to international peace and security” (The Stanley Foundation, 2004), some scholars argue that the most demanding 21st-century security issues are nuclear weapons, terrorism, pandemics, and food, water, and fuel scarcity (Thakur, 2003). Consequently, mutable security threats such as cyber-attacks, forced migration, the proliferation of small arms, and environmental degradation have lacked adequate, immediate UN attention. For example, the UN general assembly has been discussing cybersecurity since 1998, when the Russian Federation introduced the need to address developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security (Maurer, 2011). However, currently, the UN recognizes that it has been unsuccessful in driving the creation of effective rules for state activity in cyberspace (Fidler, 2018).

The absence of a common understanding of security threats hampers the UN's decisions on global security priorities and finding the best option to address them, impacting its effectiveness adversely. (Ardila Castro, Sierra Zamora & Whetham, 2021). However, an alternative viewpoint is that the UN has a very broad understanding of the nature of contemporary security threats, from the human to the international level. As a result, the UN Security Council, which is responsible for the “maintenance of international peace and security” (United Nations, 2018b), has been widely criticized because of the alleged politicization of its decisions and the abuse of veto power (Weiss, 2003). Furthermore, the deployment of peacekeeping missions and the application of the responsibility to protect doctrine (R2P)—this is the responsibility of governments and the international communi-

ty to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (Camelo, 2011; Scheffer, 2007)— have been denounced as unbalanced and more related to geopolitical interests and interventionism than to humanitarian assistance (Chandler, 2004; Cunliffe, 2017).

The second consideration concerns the UN's difficulties in selecting the best option to tackle security challenges and the methodology to measure its success. Operational disasters such as Rwanda, Bosnia, and Congo (Boot, 2000; Emizet, 2000; Shawcross, 2000; Wabgou, 2013), resulted from the lack of proper UN situational awareness; its state participants acted on their interests and not for the common good (Vallejo Almeida, 2009, 2011, 2012). It also could be argued that this will always happen in an organization comprised of states; it cannot be more than its member-states want it to be. Moreover, these cases showed multiple flaws within the UN structure, which misconstrued the security threats and their impact on the millennium development goals and the existing norms and policies to tackle these challenges, as well as the institutions existing to enforce compliance with international law (Pushkina, 2006).

Because of the convolutedness of contemporary scenarios and threats vis-à-vis UN capabilities, few models exist to assess its effectiveness. For instance, the model suggested by Bratt provides a four-element method to assess UN operational success within peace-keeping operations including, “mandate performance, facilitation of conflict resolution, conflict containment, and limitation of casualties” (Bratt, 1996, p. 64). However, although useful when evaluating security challenges in military, societal, political, economic, and environmental sectors (Buzan et al., 1998), the model may not be broad enough to measure other elements related to security challenges, such as hunger mitigation, health protection, or international justice application (Rey Pinto, Cabrera Cabrera & Miron, 2021).

Central to both considerations on the UN's effectiveness in dealing with security challenges is the existence of ungoverned spaces in fragile states that foster criminal activities under a deviant globalization scheme, frequently becoming cross-border security challenges. In some regions, the lack of state capacity¹ enables the convergence of criminal organizations that profit from the absence of legal, economic opportunities, and government authority. Weakened security apparatuses and secluded geographical areas are used to blur inter-state boundaries and foster the creation of criminal hubs. Several studies have documented these injurious situations, highlighting the impact of state fragility and contemporary geopolitical issues on the nascence of security challenges (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010; Rabasa, 2007). These studies have primarily addressed how the dilemma of troubled countries to grant more authority to the UN to tackle national limitations at the expense of detriment on their sovereignty affects UN effectiveness and poses a

1 This paper defines *state capacity* as a state's ability to protect its national interests and sovereignty, compelling the observance of its policies and guaranteeing national defense and security. For other definitions, see Geddes (1994) or Walder (1995).

risk not only to fragile states but also its neighbors. As a result, neither the states nor the supra-national organizations may appropriately address the national embryonic threats that may become global security challenges. Perhaps, the reason for such failure is that the UN is an organization comprised of states, and it is the leading states' policy preferences, or most influential on a particular issue or region, that will tend to impact most on the direction of the organization.

To countries that recognize the significance of international assistance for building state capacity to deal with unstable security scenarios, although ambiguously, the UN's value is priceless; this is Colombia's case. After reaching a peace accord in 2016 that brought about the termination of a 60-year armed conflict with the terrorist group, FARC², other criminal groups such as the ELN³ and EPL⁴, with presence in some parts of Colombian territory, have begun to compete for the FARC-vacated areas and its former illicit enterprises (Camacho Bustamante, 2019; Naranjo Álvarez, 2021; Sánchez Lozano & Sánchez Amaya, 2020). In 2018, this post-accord scenario, in addition to several social, political, and economic difficulties, classified Colombia as a country with an elevated warning of becoming a fragile state (The Fund for Peace, 2019; Palou-Loverdos, 2018; Parra Ávila & Báez Alipio, 2019). Although Colombia's security challenges do not surpass those reaching a global scale, such as North Korea, Syria, and the Islamic State, ensuring Colombia's stabilization may prevent the South American region from becoming another source of instability and concern for the international community.

The UN and the case of Colombia

The UN's role in Colombia may be considered as a case study in both UN state capacity-promoting and peacebuilding—defined as “a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development” (United Nations, 2010, p. 5)—concerning the security challenges in the 21st century. After the 2016 peace accord with the FARC, through UN Security Council resolutions 2261 of 2016 and 2366 of 2017, the UN assigned two successive political missions. They were tasked with monitoring and verifying ceasefire and cessation of hostilities and validating FARC ex-combatant reincorporation to civil life (economically, socially, and politically), guaranteeing security, and fighting against organizations and criminal conducts (United Nations, 2019c). These missions increased the UN's presence in Colombia, which up to 2018 was represented by 27 UN-related organizations and specialized agencies (United Nations, 2019b), becoming an active partner to help Colombia implement the peace process and attend to the country's security challenges. With such a presence, the UN

2 FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (acronym in Spanish).

3 ELN: National Revolutionary Army (acronym in Spanish).

4 EPL: Popular Liberation Army (acronym in Spanish).

would likely increase its effectiveness in dealing with at least two national security challenges created by Colombia's ungoverned spaces: drug trafficking, transnational crime, and terrorism.

The first security challenge in Colombia—drug trafficking—has been the main driver of violence. Despite several Colombian government efforts, with the United States government's support, to mitigate the production and commercialization of drugs, the expected goals have not been reached. In fact, in 2018, Colombia was classified as the world's highest producer of cocaine, one of the major chemical procuring sources, and a significant money laundering country (United States Department of State, 2019). Thus, drug trafficking remains a security challenge for the region due to consumption and the associated criminal networks.

To tackle this challenge, the UN has supported the Colombian government since 1985, with a permanent mission of the UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime), which has provided counsel, training, and an Integrated Illicit Crop Monitoring System (in 2000). Still, no effective reduction of illicit crops has been accomplished. On the contrary, the UNODC's 2017 report showed that coca crops increased over 50% in one year (United Nations, 2018a).

These results may be understood as a lack of UN effectiveness. However, this situation may not be a result of UN's inaction but a consequence of the former Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos Calderon's cancellation of aerial fumigation programs, based on a World Health Organization report suggesting a link between the herbicide used (Glyphosate) to cancer (Cruz & Chaparro, 2015). Moreover, the crop replacement program, part of the peace accord with the FARC, increased the number of coca plantations instead of reducing it. Some scholars suggest that "when the farmers who grew other crops noticed the benefits of the subsidies received by those who previously planted coca, many began to do so only for the government to pay them to replace the crops" (Casey, 2018). In many cases, the farmers continued the illicit cultivations when the government could not fully comply with these subsidies.

When comparing these figures to other statistics on the quantity of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana seized, and illegal crops eradicated by the Colombian authorities in 2017, a 10-20% increase is observed compared to the past years (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2019). To some extent, better results may have been expected from the UNODC as the "global leader in the fight against illicit drugs and international crime" (UNODC, 2017). Nevertheless, it is mainly the Colombian government's responsibility to address such security challenges and not the UN. In fact, UNODC's support is limited to building state capacity through "field-based technical cooperation projects, research, and analytical work, and normative assistance to bring countries closer to international standards" (United Nations, 2019a) without interfering in political resolutions. These modest results highlight the UN's impotence in facing state decisions. In other words, the UN plays its role as a supra-national advisory organi-

zation but has limited power to enforce unrestricted compliance at the national level, involving sovereign decisions.

The second security challenge in Colombia –transnational crime– encompasses a vast array of illicit enterprises controlled by armed bands. Human trafficking, forced migrations, illicit mining, forbidden logging, land theft, cattle and gasoline smuggling, extortion, and small-arms proliferation are some of the main constituents of a complex criminal network in which different illegal organizations participate and fight for control (Burgos Silva, 2010; Valero Rico, 2016; Velandia Montes, 2020). As suggested by Alvarez Calderon and Rodriguez Beltran, “the Colombian case is a clear example of the shift in nature of political conflicts towards organized criminal activities in which the pursuit of illicit profits has promoted the exercise of violence by a variety of criminal groups” (2018, p. 3).

This challenge shares its origin with drug trafficking, a power vacuum in some Colombian territories where criminal bands supplant justice. These ungoverned spaces foster deviant globalization that uses merchant routes and porous borders to deliver illicit merchandise to international destinations (Agudelo Giraldo & Riaño, 2016). Venezuela’s escalation of instability, political ineptitude, and deprivation of essential goods has fuelled Colombia’s security challenges. During the past five years, Venezuela has been consolidated as one of the main centers for illegal activities and international smuggling (McDermott, 2014). It has become a criminal ecosystem. “[T]he result of the interaction, in the same territory (same habitat) of actors outside the law and the inhabitants of the region, which establishes a relationship based on the logic of fear or mutual benefit” (Álvarez Calderón & Rodríguez Beltrán, 2018, p. 10), where different actors converge to profit. Moreover, its criticism against the UN and the international system has isolated the country from legal markets, fostering criminal opportunities in the region.

To mitigate transnational crime in Colombia, the UNODC has assisted in bolstering crime prevention and adequate prosecution to strengthen the rule of law and viable criminal justice systems (Cáceres Mendoza, 2013; Camelo, 2012; UNODC, 2019). The UN’s counseling has proven to be effective in enhancing Colombian strategies to fight against illegality. For instance, since 2016, Venezuela has been sustaining an average of 27.657 violent deaths per year, making it one of the countries with the highest rates of criminal aggression (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2018). In comparison, in the same period, Colombia reached an average of 12.474 violent deaths per year (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2019). Although these figures are not ideal, they show the difference between a rogue state such as Venezuela, which has relinquished UN support.

Terrorism draws from drug trafficking and transnational crime to increase its power and capabilities, producing another enabler of violence within the region. While

terrorist attacks have decreased during the past decade in South America, criminal ecosystems are ushering the prospect for extremist groups to expand their support networks, attack relevant targets within the region, and allow terror into the United States. Since 2015, several Hezbollah operatives have been captured in Peru and Brazil. The US has warned of the continued presence of Hezbollah in Venezuela and its use “as a base for its terror-financing network” to attack US soil (Clarke, 2019; Gámez Torres, 2020; La Nación, 2018).

Final discussion

The complexity of the challenges expected to be addressed by the UN and the progressive broadening of its goals have compromised the UN's effectiveness in dealing with contemporary security challenges (Jiménez Reina, Figueroa Pedreros & Bricknell, 2021). Similarly, the reluctance to concede to the UN major decision-making faculties and the lack of cohesion among the actors of the international system impedes timely decisions for the common good.

From this perspective, it can be said that the UN is not entirely effective in dealing with current security challenges nor to deal with those anticipated to arise later, during the 21st century. Nevertheless, the UN may still be effective in dealing with major security threats if it focuses on fragile states.

Using this approach and providing adequate assistance to build state capacity makes it possible to reduce ungoverned spaces that foster both deviant globalization and embryonic security challenges. Moreover, by focusing on a national level, the UN can shift its efforts to its primary goal of maintaining international peace and security and preventing all future conflicts. Its success will foster confidence with other key international actors.

In the case of Colombia, the UN has shown that there are vast possibilities of guaranteeing security stability for the country and the region. Drug trafficking and transnational crime are two of the region's main security challenges that enable terrorism to expand its networks. If the UN fully exploits its structure and capabilities, it will feasibly hinder the evolution of nascent threats that may become global security challenges.

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About the authors

Fredy Leonardo Galindo García is a Lieutenant Colonel of the National Army of Colombia. Lawyer from the Universidad Militar Nueva Granada. Director of the School of

Human Rights, IHL, and Legal Affairs of the Colombian Army, a specialist in Leadership and Administration of Military Units, and a specialist in Security and National Defense.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7361-5629> - contact: fredy.galindo@buzonejercito.mil.co

Juan Carlos Aristizábal Murillo has a Master's degree in Education and is a specialist in University Teaching and Research from the Universidad Sergio Arboleda. He is a Business administrator from the Universidad Militar Nueva Granada and a Military Sciences professional from the Escuela Militar de Cadetes "General José María Córdova."

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3690-3282> - contact: juanaristizabalmurillo@cedoc.edu.co

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