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The insurgency's strategic line: a national security model of analysis

La línea estratégica de la insurgencia: un modelo de análisis para la seguridad nacional

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ABSTRACT. This study seeks to determine the insurgency's strategic line using a more comprehensive methodology than the standard one used, which only measures tactical indicators quantitatively, raising doubts when appreciating other insurgency fulfilled or non-fulfilled objectives. Using the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's strategy between 2000 and 2014 as a case study, four strategic indicators were identified and standardized, and the strategic line was determined. A weakening of 61% towards the end of the period was quantified, resulting from both their errors and the National Security Strategy. These results may favor the National Security Strategy's analysis and definition facing an insurgent conflict both for the Colombian case and other similar cases worldwide.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Armed Forces of Colombia; FARC; internal armed conflict; military strategy; national security strategy; revolutionary guerrilla

RESUMEN. Esta investigación busca determinar la línea estratégica de la insurgencia con una metodología más completa que la convencional, que solo mide cuantitativamente indicadores tácticos, ya que esta genera dudas cuando se aprecian otros objetivos alcanzados o dejados de alcanzar por la insurgencia. Se utilizó como caso de estudio la estrategia de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia entre 2000 y 2014. Tras identificar y homologar cuatro indicadores estratégicos, se logró determinar su línea estratégica y cuantificar su debilitamiento en un 61% hacia el final del periodo, como producto tanto de sus errores como de la Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional. Estos resultados pueden facilitar el análisis y la definición de la estrategia de seguridad nacional ante un conflicto insurgente, tanto para el caso colombiano como para otros similares en el mundo.

KEYWORDS: conflicto armado interno; estrategia de seguridad nacional; estrategia militar; Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia FARC; guerrilla

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Introduction

At the end of 2016, Colombia's Government succeeded in signing the Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC in Spanish), after 52 years of confrontation. However, although this was the conflict's main insurgent group, there are still several guerrilla organizations, such as the FARC's dissidents, the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish), and some fractions of the People's Liberation Army (EPL in Spanish), generators of violence in the national territory and with high interference in neighboring countries. The work of Connable and Libicki (2010), which analyzed 89 insurgent groups around the world in the last sixty years, found that 17 of these groups are still in conflict (pp. 159-162). The insurgency, then, has been and will continue to be a challenge to national and international security.

Therefore, governments must make decisions within their security strategy framework to counteract the threats and risks that insurgent groups represent for the nation; this implies facing impasses in their strategies. On the one hand, they must conduct military operations to neutralize the guerrilla groups. On the other, they must seek a political solution with these groups. Although both paths seem independent and contradictory, in truth, they should be complementary and inclusive to find a comprehensive strategy to resolve the conflict. Knowing the degree to which the insurgency has been strengthened or weakened is crucial to meet these difficult challenges.

Knowing the indicators for determining the insurgency's strategies and strengthening or weakening as an organization can help leaders and strategic planners analyze and make appropriate decisions regarding the National Security Strategy (NSS). This information would answer several strategic questions: Is the NSS relevant, coherent, and adequate for the State's political purposes? Is the NSS well planned, conducted, and implemented to neutralize the insurgency? What other elements in the *mode* (how) and the *means* (resources and instruments) does the NSS require to achieve the policy *goals*? And especially, what time and conditions are the most appropriate to seek a political solution to the conflict?

This article aims to identify the insurgency's strategic line by determining the indicators that will allow the construction and understanding of the insurgency's strategic strengthening or weakening. The analysis of this line can be a tool to help political decision-making and the formulation of national security strategies in the search for a solution to an insurgent conflict.

In this work, the insurgency's strategic line is understood as the guerrilla group's level of strength or weakness to achieve its main objectives. Typically, only tactical indicators are taken into account in analyzing the different types of conflict, indicators like

casualties, whether killed in combat, wounded, or captured, or the number of guerrilla voluntary surrenders or deserters. However, when looking at other objectives achieved or not achieved by the opposing parties, this strictly tactical and quantitative analysis is insufficient. These shortfalls are evident in, for instance, in the Vietnam War. On this, Connable and Libicki (2010) stated, “In the case of Vietnam, the tactical indicators were therefore misleading: they concealed a shift towards strategic defeat” (p. 24, author’s translation). These authors’ research suggests an analysis that includes qualitative indicators, in addition to quantitative indicators. They also study each case separately to consider the context and circumstances. With this in mind, this work is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. It proposes a mixed methodology that considers other indicators, in addition to the tactical data of a conflict, to obtain a more comprehensive strategic analysis.

The methodology used in this work is descriptive. It is based on the compilation and analysis of qualitative and quantitative information on the Colombian conflict between 2000 and 2014. the FARC’s strategy is specifically used as a case study. In a globalized world, threats have mutated in the same direction; the threats and risks faced by states today are similar in terms of security. In recent years, there has been an unprecedented increase in interactivity between different kinds of illicit networks and between emerging hybrid organizations (Matfess & Miklaucic, 2016, p. ix), using methods characteristic of terrorists and criminal groups. Until 2014, the FARC, the main group analyzed in this article, was not foreign to the methods mentioned above.

The information was collected through formal requests to official sources, such as the Ministries of National Defense and Finance, the National Planning Department, the Military Forces, and the National Police. Official documents published on the web, information from different foundations specialized in conflict and peace issues, the databases of the Historical Memory Center (n.d.), FARC documents, and interviews with senior officials of the Military Forces, experts on the Colombian conflict, as well as research published in books and articles on the subject were also used.

Determining the FARC’s strategy’s degree of strengthening or weakening between 2000 and 2014 was accomplished in six steps. First, the indicators that express the insurgency’s strengthening or weakening were identified, taking into account the conventional insurgent and counterinsurgent theory. The second step involved finding current worldwide research on insurgencies that established indicators for understanding how insurgencies come to an end. The third step specified the objectives of the insurgency strategy—in this case, the FARC—in the period from 2000 to 2014. The fourth step consisted of a qualitative analysis using a matrix to standardize the indicators, including

determinants for a strengthened or weakened guerrilla. The four resulting indicators were used as objects of analysis and axes for constructing the FARC's strategic line.

In the fifth step, each indicator's behavior in the study period was described through a quantitative and qualitative analysis. Finally, the sixth step involved determining the FARC's strategic line through quantitative analysis and the normalization of indicators¹ to facilitate their interpretation. Figure 1 illustrates the methodology and procedure used.

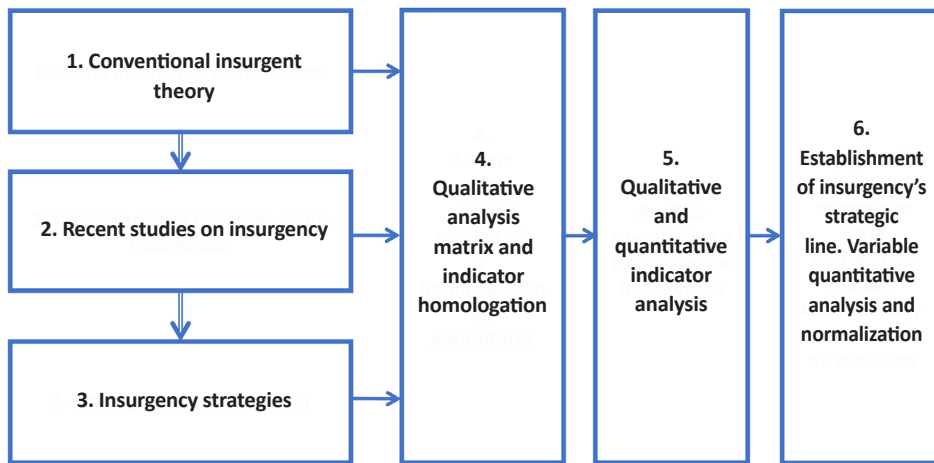


Figure 1. Methodology and procedure to build the strategic line of the insurgency
Source: Created by the author.

1. Conventional insurgent theory

This part of the research focused on selecting the recognized authorities in the area of insurgency and counter-insurgency. They had to meet the following three characteristics: 1) their concepts were results of the analysis of contemporary insurgent conflicts, at least within the FARC's initial era (the 1960s); 2) their concepts on the conflict or conflicts coincided with, at least, some basic characteristics observed in the Colombian case; and 3) their concepts are valid in the current conflicts in different countries.

The selection began with Mao Tse-Tung's *Military writings* (1967). Although the Chinese conflict differs greatly from the Colombian, "Mao is a master of strategy who will transform a band of insurgents into a victorious army, thanks to a strategy adapted"

¹ According to *The Oxford dictionary of statistical terms* (Dodge, 2003), the standardization of indicators for statistical purposes means adjusting measured values on different scales to a common scale for basic and simple cases, often based on an averaging process. This concept and procedure are applied in this research.

(Coutau-Bégarie, 2002, p. 256). Similarly, with his rural communist insurgency, Mao's concepts gave rise to other concepts adjusted to new problems and scenarios, such as the communist insurgency of Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara's *foco* theory. The Vietnamese general, Võ Nguyên Giáp, brought new philosophical elements through the *People's war, people's army*, also an inspiring text for contemporaries and future conflicts (Connable & Libicki, 2010, p. 7).

David Galulá's *Counterinsurgency warfare, theory, and practice* comes closest to the three characteristics mentioned. It proposes some indicators or requirements for a successful insurgency. These indicators (shown below) coincide with conflicts such as those in China, Vietnam, and Cuba (2006, pp. 11-28):

- Need for a cause whose strategic use, as a manipulation tactic, can be transformed into a strong insurgency.
- Suitable geographical conditions, including population support, international borders, terrain, climate, economy, country size, and location.
- Foreign support, including political, technical, moral, financial, and military aspects.

2. Recent research on insurgencies

The studies conducted by the National Defense Research Institute (RAND) in *How insurgencies end*, led by Connable and Martin Libicki (2010), is an updated, comprehensive, and relevant study to this present work. This study makes a quantitative and qualitative comparative analysis of 89 case studies of insurgencies worldwide, using lessons from the literature on insurgency and counter-insurgency. The authors propose the following indicators to show when an insurgent organization is in terminal decline (Connable & Libicki, 2010, p. 18):

- An increase in surrendered insurgents or deserters, particularly at the highest level of command.
- A greater number of actionable intelligence provided by the population.
- An elimination of the inner and outer sanctuary as a rearguard area and safe haven.
- A higher price to pay for the insurgency to obtain material, services, and information.
- A significant drop in international support, including financial support.

3. Insurgency strategy

Identifying the FARC's strategy in the Colombian conflict was essential to focus this group's case study. The objectives that this guerrilla group imposed on itself were established through its plans expressed in the "conferences," as this organization called them. These conferences were the highest governing body of the guerrilla organization. They designed and discussed the main plans, among them the FARC's strategic plan, developed during the Seventh Conference in 1982. The plan is explained in the document, *The history of the FARC-EP. Conclusions of the Seventh Conference*² (FARC, 1982). The following conclusions, which would eventually become the objectives of the strategic plan, were formulated at this conference:

- Design of a military strategy for the FARC, including a change in its operation mode, a new operational concept, and an irregular tactical model focused on integrating a revolutionary army.
- Definition of the strategic deployment center towards the Eastern Cordillera.
- Move from the rural to the urban, acquiring the conflict's urbanization as a strategic category.
- Need for logistical and military strengthening, especially weapons.
- Search for alliances with other guerrilla groups.
- Intensification of mass work to strengthen the political movement.
- Increased recruitment through the creation of commissions to strengthen their staff.

4. Indicator analysis and homologation matrix

Based on the first three steps, in which theory and practice were combined, a qualitative analysis was carried out. The indicators found were homologated (Table 1). This homologation meant to interpret the concepts with the same meaning extracted from the different sources to reach a common indicator. In order for the analysis and homologation to be functional, these methodological criteria were followed:

- The indicators were aligned horizontally, according to their relationship to the three fundamental elements of the strategy: ends, mode, and means (Column 1).
- To establish the relationship between them, each one's keywords were highlighted (Columns 2, 3, and 4); this facilitated the qualitative analysis.

2 A 295-page document found in the FARC camps, describing the conclusions of the Seventh Conference held in Cubaral, Meta, in 1982 (author's file). Throughout the conflict, the FARC held a total of ten conferences. The last one was held after the end of the peace agreements in 2016.

- The FARC's strategic plan's objectives were also analyzed as indicators.
- The result of the qualitative analysis, interpreting the concepts of the different sources, corresponds to the four indicators described in Column 5.

Table 1. Indicator analysis and homologation matrix

Strategy elements	Connable & Libicki	Galula and other sources	FARC Strategic Plan (Seventh Conference)	Resulting indicators
Purpose	Increased actionable intelligence provided by <i>population support</i> .	Need for a cause whose strategic use as a manipulation tactic can be transformed into a strong insurgency. <i>Population support</i> .	Intensify mass work to strengthen the <i>political movement</i> .	1. Political indicator. Based on the support of the population and its political movement.
Mode	Eliminating the internal and external <i>sanctuary</i> as a rearguard area and safe haven.	Appropriate <i>Geographic</i> conditions.	Design a military strategy and integration of a revolutionary army. Passing the strategic <i>deployment</i> center from the rural to the urban. Seek alliances with other guerrilla groups.	2. Indicator of the armed initiative. Based on the FARC's freedom of action to carry out its military plans and actions, the tactical and strategic offensive or defense.
Means	An increase of <i>surrendered insurgents or deserters</i> , particularly at the highest levels of <i>command blocs</i> .		Increase the <i>recruitment</i> through the creation of commissions and training of <i>blocs</i> .	3. Indicator of organizational structure. Based on human resources: personnel and command blocs.
	The insurgency must pay more for <i>material</i> , services, and information. Significant drop in international <i>support</i> , including <i>financial</i> support.	External support (including political, technical, moral, <i>financial</i> , and <i>military</i>).	The need to strengthen <i>military logistics</i> (weapons).	4. Financial indicator. Based on the financial and material resources for its logistics.

Source: Created by the author.

With this procedure, the main indicators for evaluating the strengthening or weakening of an insurgency's strategy were identified. Thus, the four indicators resulting from the matrix of analysis and homologation of indicators are 1) political indicator, 2) armed initiative indicator, 3) organizational structure indicator, and 4) financial indicator. The analysis of these indicators is indispensable for understanding and building the strategic line of the insurgency.

5. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of indicators

Once the four indicators that make up the essence of the FARC's strategy had been determined, a quantitative and qualitative analysis was carried out for each of them.

5.1 Political Indicator

The political indicator, based on the support of the population and its political movement, is represented in the assessment of the support that the FARC had among the population during the study period. The 2000 to 2014 Gallup Poll Study, conducted by Invamer, was selected to find the population's favorability concerning the FARC. The degree of favorability that Colombians had in the five most representative Government institutions associated with the NSS was also established. This led to a comparative analysis of favorability between these institutions and the FARC (Figure 2).

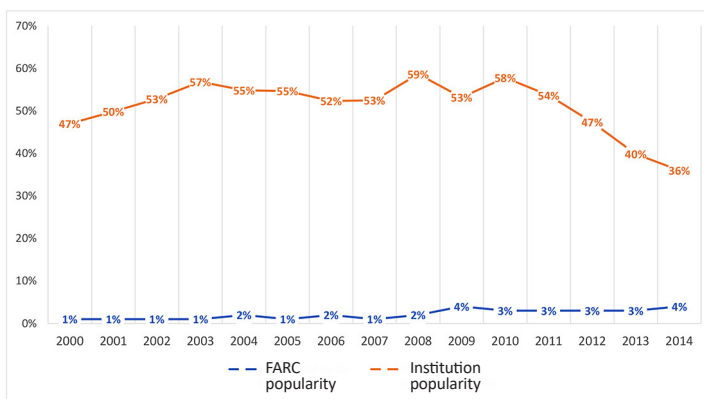


Figure 2. State institution favorability *versus* FARC favorability (2000 to 2014)
Source: Created by the author based on the Gallup Poll Study (Invamer, 2000-2014)³.

3 The most important State institutions included were the Military Forces, the National Police, Congress, the Attorney General's Office, and the Presidency of the Republic. The arithmetic mean was obtained. The results of the FARC's favorability were obtained similarly. It is important to note that an annual measurement is not available nor with similar timelines. Therefore, the information was obtained from secondary sources in which

The figure shows that Colombians favored the five selected institutions during the study period, an average of 51%. Between 2013 and 2014, there is a drop in the average of almost 11% and 15%, respectively, in the institutions' favorability. These results coincide with the country's political tension and its polarization concerning the dialogues between the Government and the FARC in Havana. The institution with the most significant rising average was the Military Forces. On the contrary, Congress was the one with the most significant descending average. The other three instances (Prosecutor's Office, Police, and Presidency) remained close to the line's arithmetic mean.

The FARC had permanently low popularity during that period, with an overall average of around 2%. They reached their maximum popularity in 2009 and 2014, with only 4%. These two years would be the exceptions in which this guerrilla had a relative upturn. The first case would be due to the guerrillas' attempt to reorient their strategy through the *Plan Renacer* in 2008, which is explained in the next paragraph. The second case coincides with the beginning of the dialogs between the Government and this guerrilla group. But, what explains the general reduced political support that the FARC had throughout the period of study? The following analysis provides some answers.

Like all insurgencies, the FARC had the central objective of strengthening its political movement. However, this guerrilla group favored the military and financial strategy rather than the political line (Ospina, 2014, p. 20). In fact, they arrived at the peace talks in Caguán (1998-2002) with a military flag. From the Government-granted demilitarized zone (42,000 square kilometers without public forces), the FARC launched the most ambitious military action since its creation⁴. The organization evaluated its strategy and realized the increasing loss of support from the population. Compelled to adjust the strategy, they designed the *Plan Renacer*⁵ in 2008 to retake the political ensign and avoid defeat as a guerrilla movement. Although support continued to be minimal, it can be inferred from Figure 2 that this plan had some positive effect on their strategy, given that the FARC had an upturn in their favor for 2008 and 2009.

Prioritizing the military strategy also affected their favorability because of the use of terrorist tools, frequently against the civilian population. The FARC carried out 4719 terrorist actions until 2012, when they began to make commitments at the Havana dialogue

Gallup's information was made public, namely, the magazine, *Semana*, and the newspapers, *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*. This demanded multiple consultations (about sixty) of such sources from 2000 to 2014

- 4 The newspaper *El Tiempo* (Vásquez, 2000) reported 29 violent actions by the FARC during the first nineteen months since the beginning of the Caguán talks, committed from the demilitarized zone.
- 5 According to FARC intelligence documents, the plan outlined several strategic level objectives: 1) strengthen relations with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, 2) procure missiles, 3) find political support from prominent people in the country, 4) improve relations with the ELN, and, above all 5) strengthen the Bolivarian Movement (MB in Spanish) and the Colombian Communist Party (PCC in Spanish).

table (Figure 3). This represented 43% of all actions carried out by the different illegal groups. The ELN would be responsible for 40% and other groups for 17%.

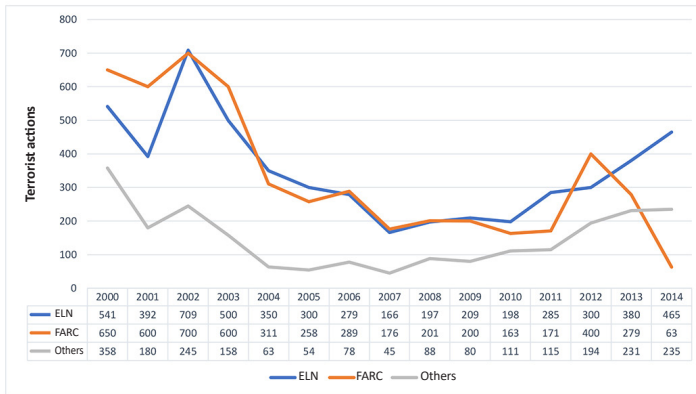


Figure 3. Terrorist actions in Colombia (2000 to 2014)

Note: The variable “Others” includes the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC in Spanish) and those that emerged after their demobilization. Those cataloged by Directive 015 of April 22, 2016 the Ministry of Defense’s as “organized armed groups” (GAO in Spanish) are included.

Source: Created by the author⁶.

Support in the international arena, which had been very effective for the FARC in previous years, was also reduced. It was affected when a significant number of countries recognized them as a terrorist organization. According to César Torres del Río (2015), when Colombia’s Caguán demilitarization zone ended, the FARC was classified as a terrorist group by the Pastrana Arango government and the Bush administration. The latter included the global pursuit of terrorism in the National Security Strategy of the United States as a reaction to the attack of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network against the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2011 (Torres, 2015, p. 343). Since 2002, a total of 33 states, including the European Union, have recognized the FARC as a terrorist organization.

The other FARC strategy that negatively impacted its favorability was financial. Drug trafficking became this guerrilla group’s main financial resource; this is amply described when addressing the financial indicator. However, the crime of kidnapping for

⁶ Information on these types of illegal actions in Colombia is not consolidated in a single source of information. The databases of the National Police (n.d.), the Ministry of National Defense, the Army Command, and the National Center of Historical Memory were checked, as well as documents of the Ideas for Peace Foundation (n.d.).

profit should also be highlighted as part of their financial strategy. This practice was the one that most affected the population. Civilians became military targets for the FARC. Their main objective was to obtain resources; however, this caused a high degree of repudiation and terror. The kidnapping and terrorism actions led Colombians to perceive themselves as hostages in the urban centers because mobilization by inter-municipal roads was very risky. Ordinary people could be victims of the FARC's actions mentioned above. Figure 4 shows how the FARC was the leading kidnapping group in Colombia during the study period.

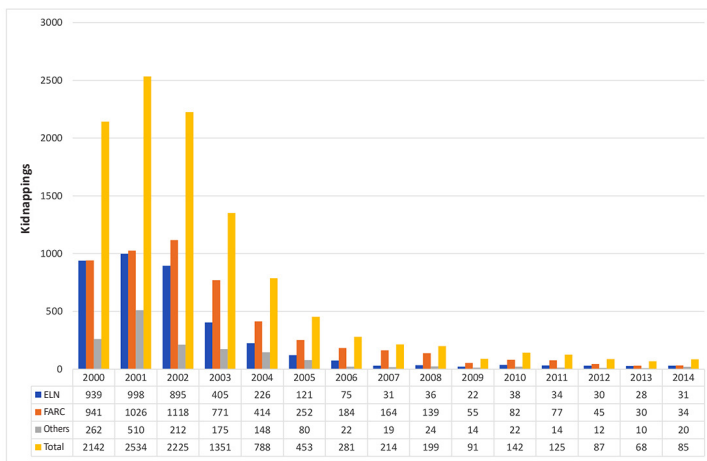


Figure 4. Kidnapping by illegal groups in Colombia (2000 to 2014)
Note: Does not include cases perpetrated by common criminals.
Source: Created by the author.

According to the data obtained, the FARC kidnapped 5332 people; this represents 50% of the kidnappings carried out by the illegal groups. The ELN kidnappings made up 36%, while other groups had a 14% share.

Regarding the political indicator, the FARC never managed to implement a strategy that would, in practice, lead to the development of a true insurgent model, for which the social movement is fundamental and decisive. In this sense, the strategic plan lacked coherence. On the one hand, the FARC always thought of access to power “as a question of agitating and moving crowds,” as Timoleón Jiménez, in his capacity as commander of the FARC’s Central Command, expressed in December 2011 (cited in Aguilera, 2013, p. 107). Their last phase was to be marked by a general insurrection, where they would lead the population under a political banner demanding changes to the system. However, its strategic plan was designed to become a machine for produc-

ing terror in the population, resorting to all illegal forms of battle. As a result, they not only lost favor with the population but also gained widespread repudiation.

5.2 Armed initiative indicator

The second indicator, the armed initiative, is based on the FARC's freedom of action to carry out its military plans. It is the degree of the organization's tactical and strategic offense or defense. To establish this initiative, seven indicators on FARC crimes were chosen for the study period 1) warlike actions against civilians, 2) actions against the public forces, 3) actions against state infrastructure (such as power towers, bridges, and roads), 4) terrorist actions, 5) kidnappings, 6) massacres, and 7) territory control. Once identified, a *standardization of indicators* was carried out to average them and obtain a percentage average. The information corresponding to the seven indicators is recorded in Tables 2 and 3. The first one shows the number of actions carried out by the FARC during the study period; the second, the historical percentage equivalent to those actions.

Table 2. Number of FARC actions (2000 to 2014)

Actions	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Warlike actions against civilians	42	42	62	25	17	17	11	10	3	5	11	12	9	4	6	276
Actions against public forces	70	81	93	100	105	94	89	70	65	54	41	35	39	28	22	986
Actions against infrastructure	90	121	100	95	88	80	79	75	85	70	60	55	45	39	40	1122
Terrorist actions	650	600	700	600	311	258	289	176	201	200	163	171	400	279	63	5061
Massacres	22	20	19	12	12	4	7	2	4	3	0	2	2	1	1	111
Kidnapping	941	1026	1118	771	414	252	184	164	139	55	82	77	45	30	34	5332
Departments recorded actions	24	25	24	22	15	15	14	12	10	15	11	11	11	4	4	217
Total	1839	1915	2116	1625	962	720	673	509	507	402	368	363	551	385	170	

Source: Created by the author.

Table 3. FARC actions in historical percentages (2000 to 2014)

Actions	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Warlike actions against civilians	68	68	100	40	27	27	18	16	5	8	18	19	15	6	10
Actions against public forces	67	77	89	95	100	90	85	67	62	51	39	33	37	27	21
Actions against infrastructure	74	100	83	79	73	66	65	62	70	58	50	45	37	32	33
Terrorist actions	93	86	100	86	44	37	41	25	29	29	23	24	57	40	9
Massacres	100	91	86	55	55	18	32	9	18	14	-	9	9	5	5
Kidnapping	84	92	100	69	37	23	16	15	12	5	7	7	4	3	3
Departments with recorded actions	96	100	96	88	60	60	56	48	40	60	44	44	44	16	16

Source: Created by the author.

All the standardized indicators were plotted using the percentages obtained in Table 3, allowing an objective comparison of the variables (Figure 5). In this figure, it is possible to evaluate the general tendencies in all seven study indicators, based on the complete visualization of the FARC's behavior in the study period. This makes it possible to find arguments and clarify the relevance of the selection of these seven indicators in determining the FARC's armed initiative.

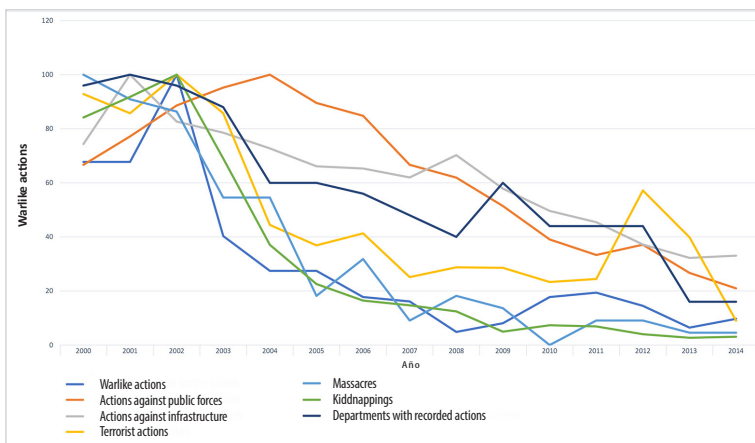


Figure 5. FARC actions in historical percentages (2000 to 2014)

Source: Created by the author.

Excluding 2002, the year in which most of the indicators were between 83% and 100%, the actions that always tended to mark the FARC's initiative during the study period were those against the country's public forces and infrastructure. The former peaked in 2004, while the latter remained between 79% and 70% in 2003-2008. The indicators that had significant changes, that coincided in a short period (2002 to 2005), were warlike actions, going from 100% to 27%; massacres from 86% to 18%; and kidnappings from 100% to 23%. The indicators that went from a decreasing to an increasing trend after 2002, in a period of only one year, were actions against infrastructure from 62% to 70% between 2007 and 2008, the departments with recorded actions (territorial indicator) from 40% to 60% between 2008 to 2009, and terrorist actions from 24% to 57% from 2011 to 2012.

These results may explain the dynamic between the Government's and the FARC's strategies or, as Coutau-Bégarie mentions, when defining the strategy (2002, p. 74), the dialectic of opposing intelligences in a conflictive environment. For example, when the NSS impacted on neutralizing actions against the population, such as kidnapping, warlike actions, and massacres, through better territorial control, the FARC's strategic response, with its *Plan Renacer*, was to privilege actions against the public force and infrastructure. They also tried to disperse their actions in the territory. This response shows this group's interest in changing their strategy to recover the population's support through mass work, and, consequently, their attempt to retake different areas where the public forces controlled them. The results also show that the FARC intensified terrorist actions during the time leading to the dialogues in Havana between 2011 and 2012.

The general downward trend of the armed initiative indicators between 2003 and 2014 is evident, except for the two already mentioned. This information is decisive for the Government's evaluation of the NSS. The dynamics of each indicator is also important for better decision-making. Once this exercise was completed, and thanks to the harmonization of the seven indicators through their percentage representation, an arithmetic mean was obtained, reflecting the *FARC's armed initiative* (Figure 6).

Figure 6 also shows that the FARC obtained its maximum initiative during 2002, represented by the arithmetic average of 93%. The lowest initiative was in 2014, with an average of 14%. In 2003, this guerrilla group's initiative began to lose influence. This drop coincided with the new NSS, which materialized in the Democratic Defense and Security Policy (PDSD in Spanish). The FARC's initiative fell from 93% to 73% in a single year, meaning 20 percentage points in a very short period; this demonstrates the new NSS's benefits since its inception.

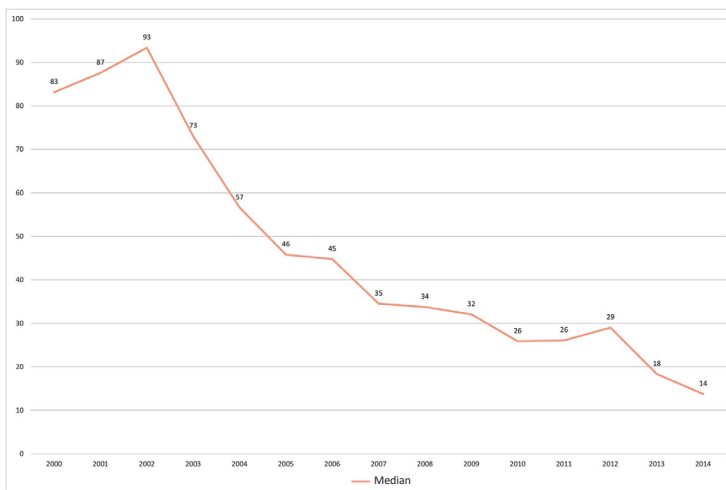


Figure 6. FARC armed initiative (2000 to 2014).

Source: Created by the author.

It should also be noted that when the Government decided to approach the FARC to negotiate, in 2010 and 2011, the initiative was at 26%. It continued to decline to 14% when the negotiations officially came to a close in late 2014. The only change in this constant downward trend of the FARC's initiative was recorded in 2012, a situation, as mentioned, related to the dynamics of the beginning of the Havana dialogs.

5.3 Organizational Structure Indicator

The third indicator, organizational structure, is based on human resources. In other words, it is based on the number of armed members the organization had and how these numbers have decreased due to the NSS's effect, either as a product of clashes with the public forces, judicialization processes, and subsequent apprehension or by voluntary surrender (desertions or demobilization processes). Figures 7 and 8 show the general behavior of this indicator. The first one presents the numbers of FARC armed members, and the second makes a representation in percentages.

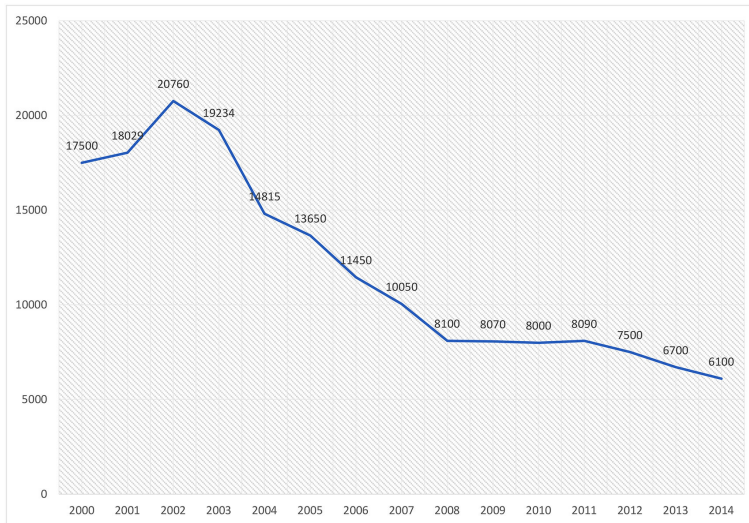


Figure 7. FARC armed members (2000 to 2014).

Source: Created by the author based on data obtained from the Army Intelligence Directorate (2020)⁷.

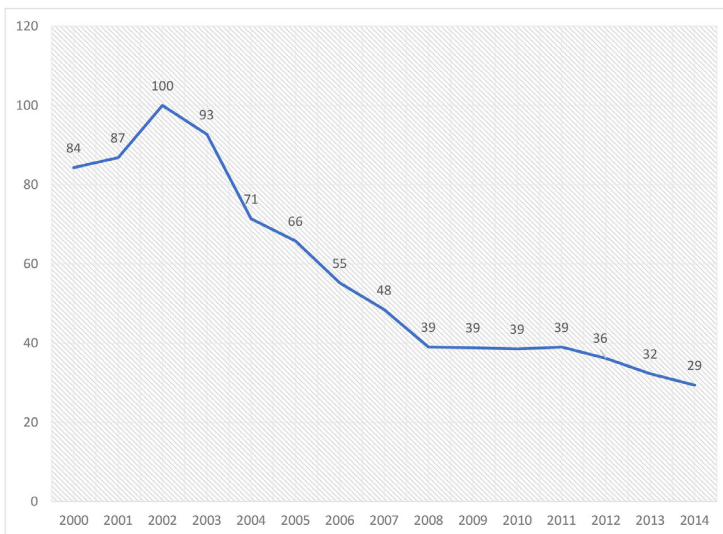


Figure 8. FARC armed members in percentages (2000 to 2014).

Source: Created by the author based on data obtained from the Army Intelligence Directorate (2020).

⁷ These data are the product of inter-institutional working groups. At least every three months, and during the last fifteen years, many of the institutions and agencies of the Military Forces, National Police, delegates from the Defense sector, and the Prosecutor's Office, among others, met to establish what was called the "threat count." This exercise was so serious that, when the FARC signed the Peace Agreement with the government in 2016, the data provided by that guerrilla group coincided for the most part with that of state intelligence in general.

In 2002, the FARC reached its maximum strength, with 20,760 armed members. From that year on, this indicator began to fluctuate continuously. In 2014, a downward trend reached a minimum of 6,100 armed members. During the study period, the FARC had a reduction equivalent to 71% of its troops. The greatest reduction was recorded between 2003 and 2004, with a percentage decrease of 22%. It can be inferred that, in that period, the NSS was already in full implementation, showing the successful influence on the organization's structure.

This trend reached a seeming stagnation between 2008 and 2011. The FARC kept its armed members over 8000. There was even a small increase between 2010 and 2011 when they reached 8090 men in arms. There are several reasons for this. On the guerrilla side, this stagnation coincides with the formulation and implementation of their *Plan Renacer*, suggesting that this plan had a favorable impact on the FARC.

However, another situation most likely influenced the NSS's ongoing offensive. Between 2006 and 2008, events related to several of the deaths recorded occurred. In this regard, Pinzón (2016) stated, “—probably some guerrillas killed out of combat, but certainly also some civilians— presented [by the troop] as results in combat. What was called ‘false positive’ [extrajudicial killing] was a real nightmare” (p. xxx)⁸. These events particularly affected the Government and its military forces' legitimacy and produced legal uncertainty for the troops that generated distrust in their actions. In fact, as shown in Figure 8, the stagnation in the decline of the FARC's organizational structure remained at 39% between 2008 and 2011.

The number of FARC armed members also included the different-level commanders or leaders neutralized. In any guerrilla organization, the loss of its leaders has a strategic impact because its command and control are weakened, which has a strong impact on its members' morale. Above all, it has a special meaning in security strategy. When the number of affected leaders is high, it means that the public force has the initiative and the offensive and is reaching the organization's strategic rear. This means that its center of gravity, where the organization's strength and intelligence originates, is being reached, which consequently affects a guerrilla's will to fight. The neutralization of cadres obeyed a specific strategy of the Government that, thanks to its positive results, gave most Colombians a hope of victory. Figure 9 shows the evolution of the involvement of the ringleaders.

8 Juan Carlos Pinzón Bueno was Vice Minister during the time of the events and Colombian Minister of Defense from 2011 to 2015.

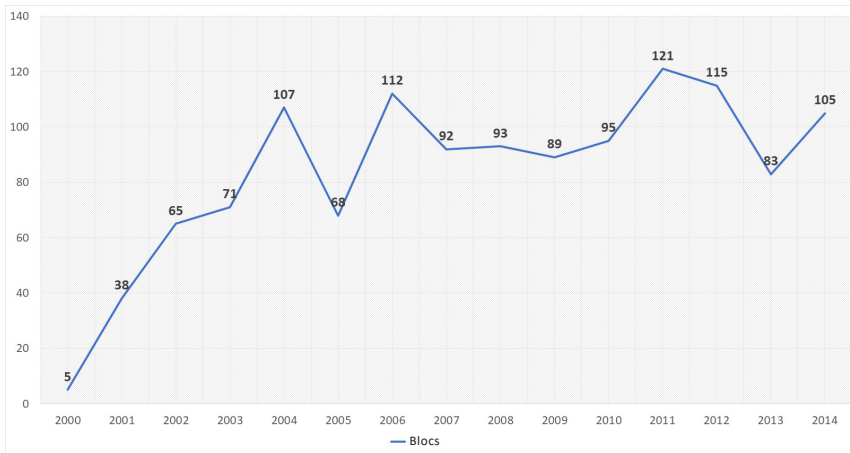


Figure 9. FARC leaders neutralized in percentages (2000 to 2014)

Source: Created by the author based on information obtained from the Army (2020).

5.4 Financial Indicator

The fourth is the financial indicator. It is based on the economic and material resources for the organization's logistics. For this work, drug trafficking was selected as the FARC's main funding source during the study period. While extortion, kidnapping, and illegal gold mining were also part of the FARC's finances, they have not been considered in this work. In the first place, extortion has taken a back seat since the FARC became involved in the drug trafficking chain. Even since the early 1990s, drug trafficking had already become their main source of funding. A study carried out by the Universidad Nacional's Institute of Political Studies and International Relations (Iepri) confirms that "it is clear that resources from drug trafficking have been the strongest source of income; by 1992, for example, it was estimated that drug revenues constituted 70% of total income" (Aguilera, 2013, p. 74). Secondly, drug dividends are enormous compared to extortion, making it irrelevant to their finances. Thirdly, obtaining accurate information is not easy for kidnapping or illegal mining. Illegal groups extort on behalf of others, making the exact origin of the activity uncertain. Fourthly, and in line with the previous, there are no rigorous studies to establish the FARC resources obtained from kidnapping and extortion as sources of funding. Lastly, this work does not aim to quantify the FARC's finances but only to understand this indicator's behavior in its strategy. So that drug trafficking allows the achievement of this objective, as explained below.

Drug trafficking was the fuel that increased the levels of violence during the conflict; it financed the guerrilla groups —especially the FARC— and the paramilitaries. The

Universidad de los Andes' Center for Security and Drug Studies (CESED) concluded in a study that "In addition to the damage to institutions, the insecurity and the deaths they caused, these activities financed illegal armed groups, such as the FARC guerrillas and paramilitary groups in different areas of the country." (Montenegro et al., 2019, p. 7)

Thus, the behavior of drug trafficking becomes an acceptable tool of analysis for observing the FARC's financial indicator during the study period, based on the following criteria. Although there is no concrete data on the amount of income the FARC obtained as a result of its involvement in drug trafficking (Davis et al., 2016, p. 138)⁹, the number of illicit crops may provide a rough idea of the FARC's funding dynamics. In other words, the FARC's funding from drug trafficking would be higher or lower in the same proportion to the number of cultivated hectares available in certain regions of Colombia¹⁰.

The financial indicator in figures 10 and 11 show a persistent decreasing trend. In 2000, there were 163,000 hectares planted with coca leaf in Colombia, representing 100% of the study period. These first years also saw the implementation of *Plan Colombia*, a package of US military aid to the country, associated with peace efforts and the fight against drug trafficking (Torres, 2015, p. 342). The downward trend reflects the impact of the plan on the rapid decline of crops. However, there was an abrupt change in the trend in 2007. Crops increased from 48 percent to 61 percent in just one year. This period also coincides with the NSS's decreased offensive caused by the loss of confidence and legal uncertainty to operate, resulting from the 'false positives' already mentioned.

9 However, rough data does exist. David Spencer, professor of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies (Washington D.C.) did a study in which the FARC's income from drug trafficking is estimated at 600 million dollars per year (interview conducted by the author on October 5, 2018).

10 The FARC's location always coincided with the areas of illicit crops. The FARC would quickly move into areas where no coca leaf crops existed once this illegal activity began. Examples of this are Putumayo, Catatumbo, and Chocó, among others. The greater the boom in coca crops, the greater the presence of the FARC in the area.

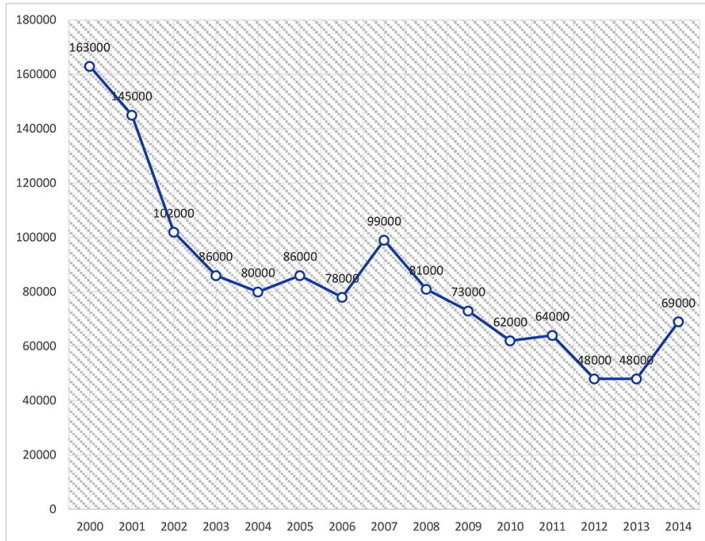


Figure 10. Number of hectares planted with coca plants (2000 to 2014).
Source: Created by the authors based on reports of the Integrated Monitoring System of Illicit Crops (Simci) (2000-2014)¹¹.

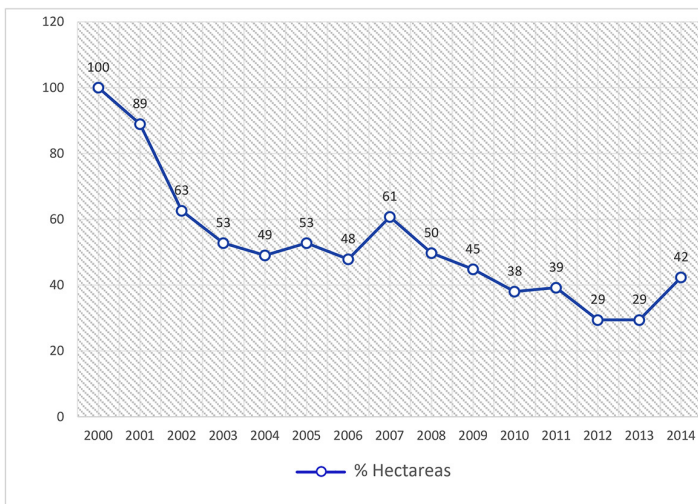


Figure 11. Hectares planted with coca plant in percentage (2000 to 2014)
Source: Created by the author based on Simci reports.

11 For Colombia's Government, the Simci report has official validity because of its measurement methodology, led by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). It consists of a census of 100% of the territory affected by coca crops. It differs from the U.S. State Department's report, which consists of calculations from satellite photos.

The decreasing trend was reversed again from 29% in 2013 —the lowest during the period— to 42% in 2014. This period corresponded to the negotiation of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC. At that time, the government changed the strategy of aerial spraying of illicit crops in favor of the voluntary eradication programs in the context of the Havana dialogues:

[...] This reduction trend was reverted since 2014 after aerial spraying was banned in national parks. The increase in coca cultivation coincides with the beginning of the government's peace talks with the FARC and becomes more acute in 2015 after glyphosate spraying was suspended. In 2016, after the signing of the Peace Agreement, the number of cultivated hectares increases, a situation that becomes more acute in 2017. (Montenegro et al., p. 19)

Consequently, the financial indicator for the FARC case was based mainly on its link to the planting and production of the coca plant. In this sense, the FARC's finances were proportionally affected to the extent that the government's NSS managed to impact and diminish the crop. Overall, the financial indicator's behavior during the period also weakened the FARC's strategy. As General Ospina (2014) stated: "Drug-based logistics have also been significantly reduced [...]; the era of opulence and waste is a thing of the past, and support for future total offensives is no longer possible." (p. 28)

6. The FARC's strategic line and its weakening

Upon analyzing the indicators according to the proposed methodology, the FARC's strategic line and its weakening from 2000 to 2014 can be established as the main result of this research. This result was obtained by determining all the indicators analyzed and representing them in percentage values, as presented in Table 4. This was done through the indicators' simultaneous comparative analysis (Figure 12) and the establishment of their arithmetic mean (Figure 13).

Table 4. Indicators in percentages for the construction of the FARC’s strategic line (2000 to 2014)

Indicators	Percentages per year														
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Armed initiative	83	88	93	73	57	46	45	35	34	32	26	26	29	18	14
Organizational structure	84	87	100	93	71	66	55	48	39	39	39	39	36	32	29
Financial	100	89	63	53	49	53	48	51	50	45	38	39	29	29	42
Political	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	4	3	3	3	3	4

Source: Created by the author.

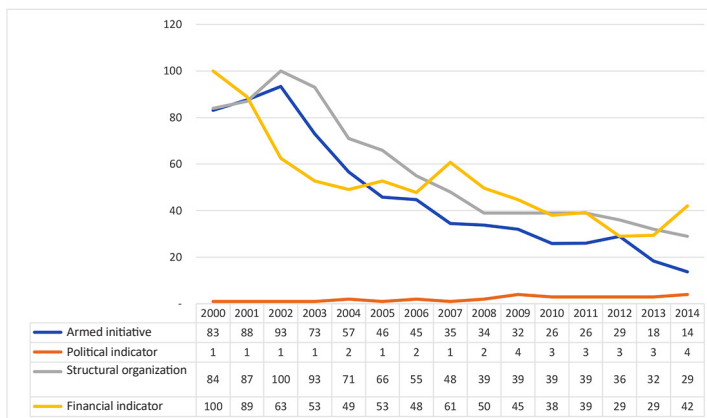


Figure 12. The FARC’s strategic indicators in percentages (2000 to 2014)

Source: Created by the author.

Figure 12 shows that the political indicator is the only one that does not show a decreasing trend or behavior similar to the others. As analyzed, the FARC’s political strategy never had the results expected by this guerrilla group. On the contrary, their political strategy, as can be seen among the four main indicators of the FARC’s strategy, was their biggest mistake since the beginning of the period. Therefore, the political indicator did not influence the final construction of the FARC’s strategic weakening line. Thus, only the other three indicators were considered: the armed initiative, the organizational structure, and the financial indicator. From the arithmetic average of these three indicators,

the FARC's strategic line from 2000 to 2014 is ultimately obtained, reflecting a strategic weakening (Figure 13).

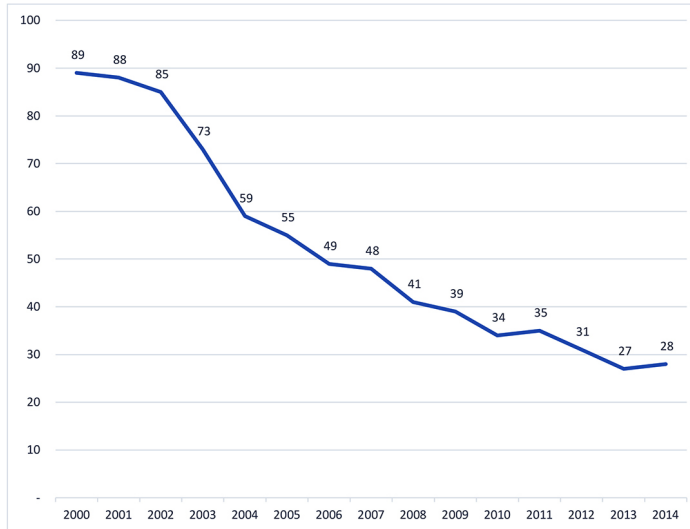


Figure 13. Weakening of the FARC's strategic line (2000 to 2014).

Source: Created by the author.

Figure 13 highlights that the FARC's strategic line during the study period had a constant downward trend, thus call the "weakening line." Without considering the political indicator, only between 2000 and 2002 was there a sustained strategic strengthening of the FARC, increasing from 89% to 85%. The abrupt fall of the line occurs in the following years. From 2002 to 2004 it decreases by 26%, the largest drop in the study period. Then, there is only a small change in the trend between 2010 and 2011, from 34% to 35%, representing a slight recovery.

In addition to presenting the insurgency's strategic line and determining indicators for the NSS analysis as the main result of the research, this work also yields interesting results derived from the concrete analysis of the FARC case. They are summarized below.

The FARC's level of strategic weakening recorded provides an objective and real appreciation of this guerrilla group's situation for the period of study. The degree of weakening reached a difference of 61 percentage points. Decreasingly and continuously, it went from a strengthened line in 2000 with 89% to its lowest level, 27%, in 2013. This period coincides with the first year of talks between the government and the FARC in Havana. In other words, the Colombian government began negotiations with a strategically weak-

ened guerrilla group. The four indicators analyzed represent the pillars of an insurgency's strategy. The analysis shows that the guerrilla's strategy weakened to the extent that they were affected, especially the political indicator, which should be the strongest. The research also shows that this last indicator was the FARC's biggest strategic mistake.

Finally, the findings on the strategy proposed by the guerrillas with a view to the NSS can also be discussed. These four indicators could help in the design and monitoring of safety strategies. To neutralize an insurgency, there must be concrete plans to address each indicator. It also demands a simultaneous and permanent political decision by the State; the non-observance of even one of these indicators can affect the security strategy. This occurred with the FARC's financial indicator; the decision to change the strategy against illicit crops allowed this guerrilla group some recovery in only one year, without considering the impact on the other illegal groups whose main funding source is also drug trafficking.

Similarly, the NSS can face obstacles that should be prevented. For instance, the troops' legal uncertainty occurred in 2007, a situation that was immediately exploited the FARC immediately exploited. Another challenge for improvement on the part of the government is the lack of strategy concerning the insurgency's political indicator. While it is true that this was the FARC's greatest strategic error, it is no less true that the NSS was limited on the political indicator and lacked initiatives such as those formulated to weaken the other three indicators.

Conclusions

The identification and analysis of these four indicators made it possible to determine an insurgent group's strategic line during a period of study. Unlike those traditionally used, focused on the number of casualties among their troops, this methodology provides a more comprehensive analysis of the guerrillas' degree of strategic weakening or strengthening. This methodology can serve as a reference for other insurgent conflicts in the world. Identifying these four indicators: political, armed initiative, organizational structure, and financial, is proposed as a determinant for analyzing both an insurgent strategy and the NSS needed to counter it.

Thanks to the finding of the FARC's strategic weakening during the period 2000 to 2014, which shows a strengthened strategic line in the first two years, but weakened in the following twelve years, it can be seen that the NSS managed to strategically weaken the FARC by 61% during the different governments of the period. The FARC's strategic line allows us to understand the NSS's impact, both its successes and its difficulties. The lessons derived from this must be analyzed and learned so that governments and their public forces can take advantage of the strengths and avoid mistakes.

This investigation also highlighted the FARC's strategic errors. The line of strategic weakening shows the substantial change of plans to which they were forced as an organization: from taking power by armed force to a negotiated solution. The strategic plan created in 1982, during the Seventh Guerrilla Conference, was nothing more than an unrealizable fabrication from every perspective, which in the period analyzed, categorically failed. In that sense, the plan itself became their worst mistake. The cost they paid as an organization to keep both the plan and its militaristic approach alive was very high. The fact that they maintained this plan was possibly two-fold. On the one hand, the FARC needed to justify an alleged cause to its members to maintain cohesion and discipline as an organization. On the other, they needed to reach the negotiation table with the Government as an organization, albeit weakened, with a strong plan and ideas as a guerrilla group with the scarce but still valid possibility of doing harm as an armed organization.

However, the FARC's strategic line's persistent weakening, which reached a minimum of 27%, shows a different reality. The FARC had lost most of its strategic accretions, represented in the four indicators studied, especially its political indicator, the soul and ideological sustenance of any insurgency: "The best cause for the purpose of a [successful] insurgency is that it can attract the largest number of supporters and repel the fewest opponents" (Galula, 2006, p. 13, author's translation). In political terms, the FARC never obtained the expected results from its strategic plan. Thus, the FARC had no other option but to enter into talks with the government in 2012. Through a political agreement, they achieved what they could not through a strategic plan that privileged the armed, violent, and drug-related struggle over ideals.

In response to one of this paper's initial questions, the moment chosen by the government to hold the talks with the FARC was spot on, if one considers this armed group's line of strategic weakness. However, other questions arise from the results obtained that demand new research work. For example: Did the government take advantage of the FARC's strategic weakening in the Havana talks to achieve real and sustainable peace for Colombians? And, in this context: Were the right political and strategic decisions made regarding national security? Lastly, what were the aspects of the NSS that could have influenced the FARC's line of strategic weakening?

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