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Peace and Conflict Studies

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS OF CIVIL WAR

IN LATIN AMERICA

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1.-Introduction

While most of the literature on peace and conflict resolution focus in the internal factors of intrastate conflict, and considers external factors only as the intervention of "a third party", adding to its exacerbation if negative or its resolution when positive, this essay builds on the notion that, for historical and structural reasons, in Latin America violent conflict presents an external dimension, and that foreign intervention is a permanent feature. It will be argued through the comparative analysis of the dynamics of civil war in three countries -El Salvador, Guatemala and Colombia- that although internal factors take preeminence in the consideration of the sources of violence, state level factors do not operate in a vacuum, and that the combination and interaction of regional and systemic level conditions, and the actions undertaken by the hegemonic power in the region play a significant role.

Both aspects -conditions and actions- derive from the application of National Security Doctrine that the United States devised in the context of the Cold War and that functioned as ideological legitimization of the global expansion of U.S. interests. In the Western Hemisphere, the doctrine took very concrete expression in a set of policies designed to secure the United States traditional sphere of influence in the bipolar international system. According to U.S. conceptualization of regional security, Latin American armies' role was to guarantee internal stability, which meant preserving the status quo. From the 1960s on, these policies were implemented mainly as counterinsurgency strategies to meet the challenges posed by the guerrilla movements. The net results were the further polarization and

destabilization of those societies, as in the case of violent and prolonged civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, and as in Colombia, the oldest armed conflict in the region.

Edward Azar 's theory of Protracted Social Conflict,¹ that at the intermediate level provides a bridge between the generic models from the conflict resolution tradition and specific political and historical explanations of particular conflicts, establishes the necessary links between internal and external causal factors of civil war. Although developed during de 1970s and 1980, this theoretical approach offers insight into contemporary conflict analysis and help to situate it the context of social and international conditions.

Drawing from Azar's emphasis that the sources of civil wars lay predominantly within the state, and his recognition of the role that what he called "international linkages" play, this essay will develop the argument that the counterinsurgencies policies established to neutralize the guerrilla movements in Latin American countries in the early 1960s within the framework of the National Security Doctrine proclaimed by the United States in the context of the Cold War, allowed the state to impose internal conditions of indiscriminate terror directed to the civilian population with the immediate consequences of thousand of deaths, massive displacement and human rights abuses, and with unforeseeable results at societal levels, contributing to the further fragmentation of already highly polarized internal situations.

¹ Azar's theory developed through a series of studies, but it is best display in his book *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*, Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1990

The three case study conflicts were selected with the criteria that:

- All presented the characteristics of Protracted Social Conflicts, starting as civil wars, but with strong regional and international security dimension.
- All represented expressions of long-festering political instability.
- All have socioeconomic roots pertaining to a common history of export economies based on cash crops, gross inequality of land tenure, and oligarchic rule characterized by economical and political exclusion.
- None was a manifestation of ethnicity even though the three countries have plural societies, with different proportions of indigenous population.
- All were approached by the state from a counterinsurgency perspective.

In section 2 we will present the conditions at the systemic and regional levels. Section 3 gives a brief description of the three case studies. Section 4 summarizes the common features and main differences in the correlation between internal and external factor in the dynamics of conflicts in the cases. Section 5 concludes.

The purpose of the present paper is promote discussion about the interaction of internal and external causal factors in view of its wide implications for conflict resolution theory and practice. As both an analytic and normative field, conflict resolution is not only concerned with the symptoms of destructive conflict but with the causes as well.

2.- The Role of Systemic and Regional Level Conditions

The United States has emerged from the Second World war with the strongest economy and as the sole nuclear power. The destruction of the war had left the rest of the developed countries -among the victors and defeated- in terrible economic situation, creating the necessary conditions for the new role of the United States as hegemon within the capitalist world economy, for which the Bretton Woods conference in July 1944 laid the groundwork. At this conference, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were founded as multilateral institutions designed to regulate economic challenges under U.S. control and guidance. The U.S. dollar became the most important international currency and thus became a crucial pillar of the postwar global financial system.

But the new international order under U.S. hegemony required of an interventionist foreign policy. The domestic support for such policy involved the creation of a permanent enemy. The Soviet Union's aspirations to carve for itself a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe -recognized as a legitimate security concern at the Yalta Conference in 1945- were presented as a probe of Soviet communist expansionism in order to justify an active military posture and engagement in world affairs. Under the mantle of the threat to national security posted by the spread of communism, the United States reorganized its defense and security apparatus, elaborating at the same time a geo-strategic and geo-political conception known as the National Security Doctrine. On August 30, 1948, the U.S. Government instituted its first peacetime military draft. A few months later it joined its first

major military alliance by becoming a signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that represented the institutional recognition of the deep division in Europe that characterized the Cold War.

However, the United States commitment in Europe were made possible only because its own sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere had been secured through a regional system that also implicated a high degree of institutionalization, starting with the Rio Treaty of 1947 and the creation of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948. In 1951 the U.S. Congress passed the Military Defense Assistance Act that created new ties between Washington and Latin American armed forces, and the United States undertook training of Latin American officers at the School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone.

This Cold War organizational framework effectively tied the Latin American region to the anticommunist coalition under U.S. leadership, but not on equal footing, like in the case of the U.S. Western European allies. Under a much less structured military system of "collective security", the role of the Latin American armed forces was secondary and subordinated. In the early 1960s, when societal breakdown raised the specter of leftist revolution in several countries, and in the context of the "Alliance for Progress" announced by the Kennedy Administration, the emphasis of the U.S. military assistance program changed from "hemispheric defense" to "internal security".

The National Security Doctrine provided a new legitimatization for the old practice of U.S. interventionism in Latin America. The reference to the communist threat gave the U.S. the opportunity to intervene in the internal affairs of the Latin

American countries in order to sustain the political and economic forces that represented U.S. interests locally, which in the regional context meant intervention against all forms of economic, political or social change that could affect the status quo.

A case in point is Guatemala, where the democratic experiment of the popularly elected government of Jacobo Arbenz, aimed to create a modern capitalist society, conflicted with the anachronistic interests of the landed oligarchy and the ones of the United Fruit Company, the International Railways of Central America, and the utility company, Electric Bond and Share, all U.S. based monopolies.

The direct threat to U.S. corporate interests was unacceptable. Pointing to a shipment of Czech arms as its anticommunist rationale, the Eisenhower Administration attacked. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, CIA Director Allan, were in charge of the operation. President Arbenz was overthrown in July 1954 in a military coup orchestrated by the CIA, and a new regime was installed under Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, with U.S. support and assistance.

After the Cuban revolution, throughout Latin America the U.S. financed changes in the local armed forces. Through programs like the Foreign Military Sales, Military Assistance, and Military Education and Training, the United States would train, equip and professionalize the military and security forces, ever augmenting their size, coercive power and role as rulers of the state. The conception of their combat function would shift too: no longer would the primary goal be defense against external aggression. Instead, the watchword would become counterinsurgency, national security and the suppression of internal dissent.

Counterinsurgency strategies were directed in Latin America to the neutralization of the so-called "first wave" of guerrilla movements that tried to replicate the success of the Cuban revolution, although guerrillas fought in Nicaragua under the leadership of Sandino during de 1920 and early 1930s, and the guerrilla in Colombia, with antecedents in the peasant war of the 1930s, started a low intensity war against the state in 1958.

As a war strategy, counterinsurgency consist in *separating* the guerrilla from the civilians that sustain them. Although in theory this could be accomplish by a variety of procedures, including the addressing of grievances of the peasantry in the areas the guerrilla operates, offering a peaceful road to change, etc, the practical applications of counterinsurgent methods, however, imply waving an indiscriminate war *against* the unarmed population based on torture, atrocities, massacres, and the training and arming of paramilitary forces, generating an endless circle of violence and leaving long-lasting scars and traumas in the whole society.

The primacy of the military instruments and methods to deal with social and economic problems would reinforce the ever present tendency in Latin America of rule by military regimes, symptomatic of the failure of the state in handling contradictions through political institutions and responding to the needs of ample sectors of the population. In a national context polarized and exclusionary, repression of popular and democratic demands through the military and security apparatus could only bring about the deepening and escalation of conflict.

3.-The Conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Colombia

El Salvador

El Salvador is the smallest republic in Central America. Five million people are crammed into the country, which has a greater population density than India. Nine out of ten live in the center and west, where large estates, haciendas, grow coffee and cotton for export, recruiting labor from mostly illiterate workers. Two thirds of the population live precariously on erratic incomes, and one third exists in extreme poverty. Almost 60% of the land is owned by 2% of Salvadorans, a small oligarchy of land owners and industrialists supported by the military.²

During the 1960s, and under the Alliance for Progress, U.S. investment in El Salvador rose from a book value of 19.4 to 45 million dollars. But it also brought teams of U.S. military advisers. To provide the stability and internal security that would allow economic development, the United States initiated military and police aid programs to "professionalize" the armed forces and enhance their ability to combat Cuba-style guerrillas, although no guerrilla movement existed. The United States reorganized the police school, and trained and equipped riot control units in the National police and National Guard. The Agency for International

² David J. Whittaker, ***Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World***, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 10.

Development's Office of Public Safety established a central police records bureau in El Salvador, and installed a teletype system linking the Central American countries. The network included entries on "suspected subversives".³

In 1979 a profound political crisis precipitated El Salvador into a violent conflict that lasted twelve years, and cost 70,000 people dead, most of them civilians, more than a million Salvadorans displaced from their homes, besides other human rights violations as summary arrest, torture, roving death squads and evictions. The majority of the fatalities were victims of government forces or irregulars associated with them. The United States, caught in the geo-political zero-sum game of a revived Cold War, decided to draw a line in El Salvador to "roll back" revolution in Central America.⁴ Military aid was increased, advisers were dispatched, and accusations of foreign involvement by communist powers were made. Washington insisted in unconditional surrender by dissidents 'shooting their way to power' and constantly rebuffed pacification by other international actors.

During the 1980s the armed conflict continued, but it was evident that no military victory was in sight, for neither party, the Army of the guerrillas. In 1987 a peace initiative involving the five Central American Presidents and the Secretary-

³ Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States*, Washington, D.C. and Amsterdam: Institute for Policy Studies-Transnational Institute, 1982, p. 29.

⁴ It must be remembered that the United States perceived the world at the end of the 1970s as one in which the Soviet Union was obtaining important political gains. The ousting of the Sha of Iran, the triumph of the "New Jewel" movement in the small island of Granada, the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, presented to the United States with a scenario of lost hegemony in global terms, and more threatening, in places considered as its spheres of influence.

Generals of the UN and the OAS -with the participation of the United States- opened the long road to negotiations. Transition from war to peace was agonizingly slow until culminating in a cease-fire in October 1992.

Guatemala

Guatemala is the biggest and more populated country in Central America, with a 60% indigenous people. In spite of the fact that Guatemala's political history is full of military governments and even military dictatorships, starting in 1960 with a revolt of young military officers,⁵ and specially after 1963, when a strong guerrilla movement was organized, the military's dominance of the country took on complex dimensions. Pursuant to the counterinsurgent model, the army acquired powers, functions and privileges that transcended the fight against the guerrillas. At the same time, anti-communism exacerbated as a result of the CIA's sponsored counterrevolution of 1954. . Death squads linked to the army or the security forces, that first appeared in 1960, proliferated, escalating terror to unheard levels under the blanket of exterminating communists. All these factors make the Guatemala's conflict the most violent of the three cases reviewed, with more than 200,000 people dead in the longest war in the region.

During the bloodiest years of the conflict -1979 to 1983- space for political activity was completely closed and moderate options disappeared from the political spectrum. Progressive social forces, which were labeled subversive by the military

⁵ The nationalist sentiments of the young officer corps were particularly incensed that the government had allowed the national territory to be used by the United States for the training of the Bay of Pigs Invasion forces.

who were running the counterinsurgent state, were forced either to retreat totally or to ally themselves with those who had taken up arms as the only possible means of political expression. Throughout the period, the counterinsurgency strategy enjoyed the tacit or open support of conservative elite in the country, in particular, the large landholders. By 1982, an alliance of guerrilla forces and leftist and populist forces formed the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG). By the mid 1980s, the URNG had garnered wide support in Guatemalan society, including many Catholic priests, as well as foreign sympathy.

As in the case of El Salvador, the civil war in Guatemala reached an stalemate toward the end of 1980"s. The offensive launched by the armed forces in 1988 failed to annihilate the insurgents and the war of attrition could go on indefinitely. In that context, negotiations found a space and the five Central American Presidents and the United Nations could play a role. A lengthy peace process began, that culminated with the signing of the final peace agreement between the Government of Guatemala and the URNG in December 1996.

Colombia

The history of the past half-century in Colombia has been one of continuous violence. During the 1940s and 1950s the violence was channeled through the confrontation between the Conservative and the Liberal parties, both representing the interests of the oligarchy and that had dominated the political scene since independence. The assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948 unleashed a spontaneous popular rebellion in the capital that spread to the countryside. Liberal landowners organized peasant guerrilla armies that engaged

the Conservative forces of the state in hit and run actions. Hired assassins were the part of the Conservative response to the Liberal guerrillas. Criminality and senseless violence intermixed with political and social violence. The Communist Party organized the peasant resistance in certain areas, that took first the form of self-defense but that gradually were converted into guerrilla forces.⁶

After a brief interlude of military arbitration, (1953-1957), a pact between the two warring factions of the same ruling class was reached in the form of a bipartisan state, alternating Conservatives and Liberals not only in the presidency but also in the rests of the administrative post at all levels. This power-sharing arrangement was challenged in the 1960s by independent left-wing guerrilla movements following the example of Cuba, although the rupture with past struggles was incomplete. One of these movements, the FARC, emerged directly out of the communist peasant guerrillas. During the 1970, another generation of guerrilla movement emerged, notably the M-19, of a nationalist and populist character.

The armed forces in Colombia are sort of an exception in the Latin American context in the sense that they had not played an important role in the political scene of the country. However, since the 1960s the counterinsurgency operations, involving U.S. funded civic as well as military programs contribute to give the army considerable administrative autonomy. It has also become more repressive, tending to equate legitimate social protest with subversion. Such attitudes hardened during the crisis of the early 1980s. The number of political killings carried out by it, the

⁶ For a superb description of the different stages of Colombia political violence, see Jenny Pearce,

police, the various state security forces and paramilitary groups with which they were associated rose from 105 in 1980 to 653 in 1983, with 200 people "disappearing" during the same period.

Peace process in Colombia is ongoing. During the past two decades Colombian negotiators have been able to agree in cease-fire, demobilization and re-incorporation of several separate guerrilla movements and one urban militia. But despite years of efforts, the incidence of political violence and the number of region affected have increased. A new development in Colombia's armed conflict became evident: Social violence and crime had overtaken political violence as the principal cause of violence in the country.

The conflict in Colombia was complicate further by the drug trade and cocaine export boom in the 1980s. Besides the corrupting effects it has in many sectors of society, it has had an impact in the political alliances, resources and social relations of both the guerrillas and the armed forces. It has also played a significant role in the resurrection of the old phenomenon of private paramilitary armies, with different manifestations depending on the region.

In the areas where the drug traffickers have purchased large tracks of land, they finance paramilitary groups that enhance the state security apparatus with anti-guerrilla activities. The armed forces supported and trained these groups under the believe that their expansion was an effective counterinsurgency tactic. By 1989, after the paramilitary started to target government officials, the law that permitted the military to arm civilians, dating since 1965, was revoked. But it was too late. As

the guerrillas expanded their operations to new territories, so did the paramilitary groups. During the Samper government, a new policy of arming civilians in rural security cooperatives contribute to paramilitarism as this groups soon became another armed band, responsible for some killings, although now openly and directly linked to the state.⁷

A further polarization of the conflict, and a factor that could increase its internationalization, its the new turn that the U.S. anti-narcotic war has taken with the Plan Colombia, with an emphasis in its military components, that many analysts consider a new approach to counterinsurgency. The increasing in military aid could escalated violence and hamper the peace process.

4.- Similarities and Differences in the Correlation of internal and External Factors

As the analysis of the three cases shows, a number of common features express the correlation of internal and external factors in the dynamics of civil war in Latin America:

- ◆ In all the cases, at the roots of the conflict were the socioeconomic and political conditions that prevail in societies in which the state is unable to respond to the needs and demands of ample sectors of the population due to the fact that the political order was tailored to the narrow interests of the oligarchy, could not adapt to the process of economic modernization and is incapable of reform. In the three

⁷ For a more detailed description of the complexities of the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia, see Ana Lucia Gomez Mejia, *Conflicto Territorial y Transformaciones del Paramilitarismo*, Tesis de Maestria, 1997 . (Unpublished).

countries reviewed, although some degree of industrialization has been reached, the economy depends mainly on the export on primary products, agricultural or mineral, or both, like in the Colombian case. Despite that in all cases the problem of the land has been a key factor in the civil wars, agrarian reform has never been part of the state economical agenda, only land distribution.

- ◆ In the conflicts of El Salvador and Guatemala, the historical role of the armed forces as rulers of the state on behalf of the oligarchy constituted an internal factor in the polarization and fragmentation of those societies, because the response to all political mobilization aimed at social change was repression and brutality, creating an endless circle of violence. The primacy of the military and security instruments in the context of the ideological and strategic confrontation of the Cold War, identified by the U.S. National Security Doctrine, and implemented as counterinsurgency strategies to meet the challenges to the state represented by the guerrilla movements, contributed as external factors to the exacerbation of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan civil wars. Although in Colombia there was not a significant history of military rule, the national security policies applied within the counterinsurgent model increased the participation of the military in the political life of the country, and also represented an aggravating factor to the conflict.
- ◆ All cases show the formation of paramilitary groups as part of the counterinsurgency strategy. In the Salvadoran and Guatemalan cases, those groups had a direct link with the armed and security forces or were integrated with active members of these corps, which makes them an instrument of state terrorism against

- ◆ the civil population. In the Colombian case, paramilitary groups are integrated not only by the armed and security but also by civilians, and have reached a high degree of autonomy.
- ◆ The Colombian case acquired new complexities with the drug trade, a factor not present in the rest of the conflict reviewed. The U.S. anti-narcotic policies, especially the ones under the so-called Plan Colombia, have already become an additional aggravating factor in view of its fundamentally militaristic approach.
- ◆ In neither of the two already settled armed conflicts, the Salvadoran and the Guatemalan, the solution came through a military victory, which underlines the fact that no military solution is possible in conflict in which the political and social demands are so great, the historical resentments are too high, the state authority too weak and fragmented and the violence is too rooted in local communities. In the case of Colombia, a military solution also seems improbable.

5.- Conclusions

The end of the Cold War radically affected the structure of the international system and most of the regional security arrangements throughout the world with the exception of the Americas, where the hegemonic power during the Cold War became the sole superpower at the global level. The mechanisms and instruments created in the hemisphere for the stated purpose of the containment of communism, are still in place and in use more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Only the rationalization is different. In the present times the strategies of

counterinsurgency could no longer be justified by the communist threat, so they are explained as directed to fight drug trafficking and terrorism, as in Colombia today.

It has become a commonplace to view the settlement of armed conflict in El Salvador and Guatemala as a post-Cold War phenomenon, made possible by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the removal of the East-West ideological and security dimension of internal struggles. While this is accurate, it needs some qualifications. First, it is essential to understand that with the fall of the USSR what was removed was the possibility of constructing an alternative revolutionary project with the minimal aspirations to survival, given the implacable hostility from the United States, made evident with the "dirty war" against Nicaragua. Second, ideological and security dimensions disappeared, and other international actors were able to find a space in bringing out peace because in the new conditions at system level the peace processes in both countries were not changing in any meaningful way the political, economical, and social internal structures, and obviously were not altering the basis of U.S. regional hegemony. Third, political solutions to the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala were in line with the new projections of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, that without abandoning the military instruments -as witness the Panama Invasion and the Gulf War- make of the extension of representative democracy and free market economies the main tenements for U.S. involvement in world affairs.

The conflict in Colombia, unresolved more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, has been also affected by the systemic changes. On one hand, the guerrilla movement became isolate from any external support, but have been able to find internal recourses to sustain the war. On the other hand, after so many years of

violence the armed struggle faces the increased rejection of many sectors of society. International pressure is mounting as the human rights situation continue to deteriorate and the humans rights violations can be qualified as grave, massive and systematic. As the Minister of Defense acknowledged, members of the paramilitary groups were again the principal violators. The report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the year 2000 criticized the low priority that the Colombian government has given to the recommendations in this regard, and pointed out that there was not a matter of absence of laws, program, mechanisms or institutions but a failure to use them and thus an absence of tangible decisions, action and results,⁸ underlining the lack of political will and ambiguities of the negotiation process of the Colombian government. Further international polarization was generated around the implementation of the Plan Colombia, which involved differences in approaches between the United States, that still gives a military orientation to the process and the European Community, that considers that peace involve paying attention to the humanitarian and socioeconomic conditions. In the Post-Cold War era, external factors still play an important role in conflict and conflict resolution.

⁸ Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, e Office in Colombia (1 January - 31 December 2000) , Bogota March 2001.

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