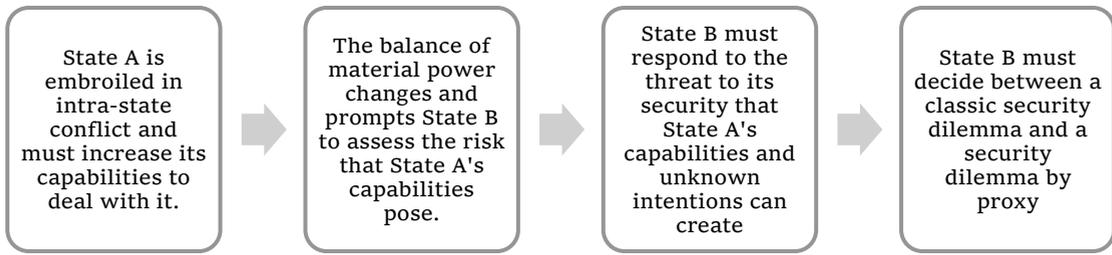


The Security Dilemma by Proxy

Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC

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There exists, beyond what international relations scholarship has defined as the security dilemma, a more complex interrelation of security competition: the security dilemma by proxy (SDBP). The SDBP logic poses that, to undermine a security threat against it, a state can fund or support another state's pre-existing domestic conflict rather than directly engage in security competition. Intra-state conflict creates the conditions for a security dilemma between states but also provides a proxy through which the threatened state can limit the threatening state's power without putting itself directly at risk—the proxy being the domestic security threat itself. Beyond the theoretical approach, this paper examines the complex relationship between Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, a left-wing guerrilla group), and argues that a security dilemma by proxy has been generated between the three actors.



I. Introduction

There exists, beyond what international relations scholarship has defined as the security dilemma, a more complex interrelation of security competition: the security dilemma by proxy (SDBP). The SDBP logic poses that, to undermine a security threat against it, a state can fund or support another state's pre-existing domestic conflict rather than directly engage in security competition. Specifically, I argue that intra-state conflict (1) creates the conditions for a security dilemma between states but also (2) provides a proxy through which the threatened state can limit the threatening state's power without putting itself directly at risk—the proxy being the domestic security threat itself. First, I briefly outline how intra-state conflict in State A can significantly alter neighbouring State B's assessment of State A's capabilities and intentions, inadvertently generating the conditions for a security dilemma. Second, I explore how the existence of intra-state conflict and a subversive third party can influence and incentivize a threatened state to veer away from classic security dilemma dynamics. Third, I present the argument that there is a security dilemma by proxy between Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Incidentally, it is worth noting at this juncture that this approach inevitably steps away from third image, structural analysis typical of security dilemma scholarship, and looks at how security dilemmas can be generated, affected or developed by domestic circumstances within

countries.

Fig. 1. Intra-state conflict and the creation of security dilemma conditions

II. The Security Dilemma Through Intra-State Conflict: Logic

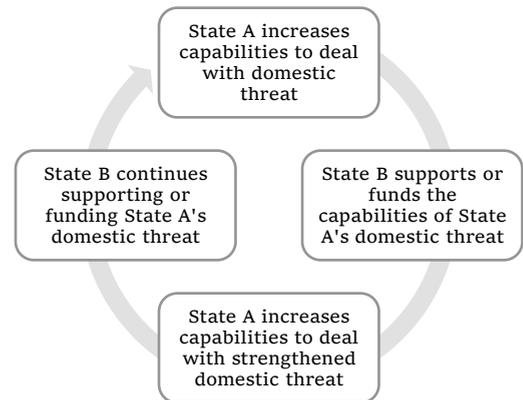
First, consider a state that is suffering from ethnic rebellions, guerrilla warfare, narcoterrorism (or any other form of critical insecurity conditions within its territory), but is located in an otherwise peaceful region. To fight this domestic insurgency, said state must develop its military capabilities to provide its armed forces with an offensive advantage over its adversary (e.g., tanks, machine guns, bombs, etc.). Though the state is developing these capabilities for the protection of its citizens from domestic problems, the material reality of these capabilities is their use for offensive purposes, whoever the adversary may be. The issue, therefore, is that by acquiring these materially offensive capabilities, the state in question can no longer signal, or communicate appropriately, a legitimately defensive intent. Because of the nature of intra-state conflict, the country must go on the offensive within its borders to maintain control of its territory and protect order, a stance that is also simultaneously defensive. The state suffering from insurgency is defending itself against domestic aggression through the growth of its offensive power. This creates a dichotomy between the message that its capabilities send to other states and the intentions it may harbour when facing the international community.

Though the conflictual state may harbour no bellicose objectives against neighbouring countries, a large standing army and the acquisition of tanks and military jets do not necessarily scream “defence” when considered in the context of an international balance of power.

What this generates, then, is a shift in the risk and security assessments done by neighbouring states, and the emergence of potential security dilemma conditions. If we assume that inherent distrust of future intentions is fundamentally built into an anarchic world, balance of power logic would tell us that State A’s territorial neighbours would feel threatened by the increase in offensive capabilities that it acquires. Put very simply, if State A begins developing its offensive military capabilities for domestic protection, States B, C, D or E are forced to assess State A as a potentially dangerous power and a destabilizer in the region. Any increase in State A’s military capabilities signifies a shift in the balance of power, regardless of who those weapons might have originally been purchased for. Communicating peaceful intentions when the material difference is too blatant becomes particularly complicated. Ultimately, though State A amasses offensive capabilities for the defence of its sovereignty within its borders, the neighbouring states can never know whether these “defence” weapons will be transformed into offensive weapons in a future where the domestic threat does not exist. The matter, therefore, becomes one of assessing risk through an appraisal of capabilities and intentions, and neither metric generates a positive outcome in a self-help system. Consider State B, for instance, and presume it has a relatively peaceful domestic sphere without any extreme offense advantage. How does State A pose a significant security threat? Its capabilities are significantly offensive in material terms, and though intentions in the present may be

defensive, an anarchic system precludes any guarantee that such will be the case forever. Thus, what we encounter here are the conditions for a potential security dilemma.

Fig. 2. Diagram of Security Dilemma by Proxy



On this note, it is worth revising some of the theoretical frameworks that construct security dilemma scholarship. Robert Jervis defines the security dilemma as the vicious cycle of security competition born from the nature of an anarchic international system. Jervis argues that the dilemma arises when “the means by which a state tries to increase its security (i.e., capabilities to defend its territorial integrity, the autonomy of its domestic political order and the dignity of its citizens from military threat) decrease the security of others.”¹ In *The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict*, Barry Posen pinpoints the origin of the dilemma and places it in conversation with situations of national struggle: “what seems sufficient to one state’s defence will seem, and often be, offensive to its neighbours. Because neighbours wish to remain autonomous and secure, they will react by trying to strengthen their own positions. States can trigger these reactions even if they have no expansionist inclinations, [and the effect can go on until one state

¹ Jervis, 1978

gives]. This is the security dilemma: what one does to enhance one's security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure."² Put in the specific terms of this paper: the fact that State A increases its military power to improve its national security, decreases the relative power of State B. Therefore, its security is also reduced, which can lead the threatened state to react in ways unfavourable to State A.

Accordingly, both Jervis and Posen make the argument that particular circumstances intensify a security dilemma, identifying specifically what they call offense-defence indistinguishability. Posen argues that "when offensive and defensive military forces are more or less identical, states cannot signal their defensive intent—that is, their limited objectives—by the kinds of military forces they choose to deploy."³ When thinking in terms of inter-state relations for this particular case, intra-state conflict creates that same effect of blurring the boundary between perceptions of offensive and defensive forces, complicating signalling of limited objectives. The capabilities of State A could be considered to be materially offensive, but defensive in the context of defending the mandate of the state from a non-state actor. Thus, the same weapons that are used today for offense and defence in a domestic context could be used tomorrow for offense in an inter-state context. Indeed, as was mentioned above, it is very difficult for State B to perceive State A's "defensive intent" when jets and tanks are being stocked in hangars just across the border. Intra-state conflict makes the already-nearly-impossible task of successfully communicating defensive intentions, in the present and future, exponentially more difficult by creating

a structural image of offensive intentions.

III. The Adversary as Proxy

All in all, the domestic nature of intra-state conflict, and the material capabilities required to deal with it, complicate the communication of non-threatening intentions by creating that operational capacity for offensive power. Under many other circumstances, this could lead into a classical security dilemma where State B resorts to developing its capabilities, thereby compelling State A to increase its military capabilities again to fight not only its domestic problems but the possible conflict with a distrusting neighbour, too. Thus, the typical spiral toward escalated conflict or war would ensue. However, the nature of intra-state conflict provides the threatened state with another, slightly less risky option within the scheme of inevitable competition.

Rather than fully engaging in security competition, State B can avoid the complications of blatant power maximization by choosing instead to support, clandestinely, State A's first adversary. Or, using the term I have coined, to engage in the security dilemma by proxy. This can be done in a variety of ways: State B could provide funding or weapons to the original aggressor, it could harbour and train some of the militants, or it could facilitate operations by letting the non-state actor pass through its territory or use it as an avenue for trade. The possibilities are extensive, but they are not without danger. Depending on the type of non-state actor that State A's initial adversary is, State B runs the risk of welcoming and supporting a threat that could take hold within its land. In this way, State B would open itself up to an even more unfavourable situation than the original threat posed by State A as an actor. Strategies for supporting the development of the proxy must, therefore, be carefully calculated

² Posen, 1993

³ Posen, 1993

to prevent the spillover of transnational criminal networks or revolutionary ideological insurrections, for example.

On a positive note, the more hands-off approach to the security competition of using the adversary to undermine State A's balance of power can protect State B in two different ways: (1) by maintaining the status quo of its other regional relationships, and (2) by allowing it to manipulate the balance of power between itself and the threatening state without having to confront the international community.

First, if State B were to develop its capabilities and pursue the regular security dilemma, States C, D, E and/or F might begin to feel threatened too. Feelings of insecurity, perpetuated by the impossibility of defining intentions, can thus begin to spread in the region and destabilize conditions towards undesirable multilateral war. Regional alliances or not, any shift in the balance of power within an anarchic system will inevitably change each state's assessment of risk and their response—though each state may perceive its development as defensive, observing countries will always see those changes as threats. In seeking to increase power relative to each other, states could spiral into a dangerous arms race or war. As such, to prevent a domino effect/worst-case scenario, State B would need to act in a way that both stabilizes its security and maintains the regional or international status quo: keeping State A in check by perpetuating the problem that keeps it embroiled in its domestic affairs in the first place. However, this is still, of course, a security dilemma: State A would have to continue growing its capabilities to fight the strengthened adversary, tipping further the material balance of power and increasing its chances of winning a future international conflict against State B or any other neighbouring country. Altogether,

the security dilemma by proxy, clandestinely executed, allows the threatened state to deal with one threat without creating new ones, i.e., keeping the original intra-state conflict contained and preventing the escalation of an intra-state conflict into an interstate conflict. State B's sponsoring of the proxy, however, is not a solution but a deviation within the self-help system.

Moreover, using the third party adversary as a proxy allows the threatened state to take action without losing face in the international community. At this juncture, it is worth noting that security dilemmas by proxy should always be done covertly, avoiding the involvement of other parties and maintaining the visible structure of regional stability. This is critical. The SDBP only works to maintain regional balance if no one can authoritatively determine whether State B is interfering with State A's sovereignty or not. If this fails and doubts spread, regional balance will fall to shambles as State B begins to be perceived as a supporter of insurgency with bellicose intentions. Because the security dilemma (as generated by intra-state conflict) deals with a particularly contradictory interplay of intentions and capabilities, trust and validation from the international community are critical for effectively communicating peaceful inter-state intentions. In other words, the security dilemma by proxy will keep State B safe from other security dilemmas, and from actual offensive aggression from State A, as long as other states and organizations are unaware that the SDBP is happening. If or when the use of the scapegoat becomes public knowledge, all bets are off—the threatened state will be perceived as a threatening state, too, and all other countries will ramp up their security measures.

IV. Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC: State A,

State B, and the Proxy

Lastly, it is worth investigating how the logic outlined in the two preceding sections comes to fruition in reality. In this section, I will examine the complex relationship between Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC, arguing that a security dilemma by proxy has been generated between the three actors. For a start, Colombia has been entangled in a deadly armed conflict since the 1960s. The factions have been multiple and have included different permutations of alliances between Marxist-Leninist terrorist guerrillas (including FARC, the proxy in question for this paper), autodefensas, paramilitary groups, drug trafficking cartels and the formal military. It is no surprise, therefore, that Colombia has been consistently increasing its defence budget over the years and comes in second after Brazil for the largest defence budget in South America—2013 figures showcase a solid 11.9% of total government spending going into military expenses.⁴ Venezuela, on the other hand, has been relatively peaceful in comparison, even if politically unstable and dubiously democratic in absolute terms. Its defence budget comes in fifth in South America and has not shown a particularly significant increase over the years. The political ideology that has governed Venezuela for the past 16 years, however, is worth mentioning: 21st-century socialism, established in the 1990s with the aim of consolidating a Bolivarian republic that is anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois and anti-neoliberal. As a result, the Venezuelan government has created a highly polarized and divided nation, with millions believing the socialist creed and millions deriding it and fleeing from the country. Moreover, it is useful to know that the historical relationship between Colombia and Venezuela has been rocky, to say the

⁴ Elizabeth Gonzalez, 2014

least—constantly oscillating between cooperation and bilateral conflict.

Accordingly, the 21st century has witnessed the increase of substantial connections between FARC, Colombia's oldest guerrilla of self-proclaimed communist origin, and Venezuela's populist government. More specifically, the connections came about ever since Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's former leftist president, came into power in 1999 and FARC lost, in 2002, the haven the Colombian government had granted them for a potential peace dialogue.⁵ Indeed, FARC-Venezuela relations became noteworthy between 2002 and 2010 under former Colombian president, Alvaro Uribe's "democratic security" policy of strong military persecution of terrorist organizations like FARC and ELN.⁶ During this decade, Venezuela became a haven for FARC, with three of its seven blocks having a significant presence within the borders of the neighbouring country. Moreover, there were numerous accusations during this decade against high-level officers of the Venezuelan government for facilitating the trafficking of cocaine for FARC, and for exchanging large shipments of the narcotic for weapons. What is more, after a raid that resulted in the death of a chief commander, Raul Reyes, evidence surfaced that Chavez had directly promised loans to FARC for the acquisition of even more weapons.⁷ Furthermore, it is worth noting that this issue of FARC settlements and freeloading in Venezuela led to diplomatic crises in 2008 and 2010, the latter occurring after the Colombian government presented evidence of FARC and ELN presence in Venezuela to the Organization of American States.⁸

⁵ Insight Crime – Centro de Investigación de Crimen Organizado, 2016

⁶ Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2003

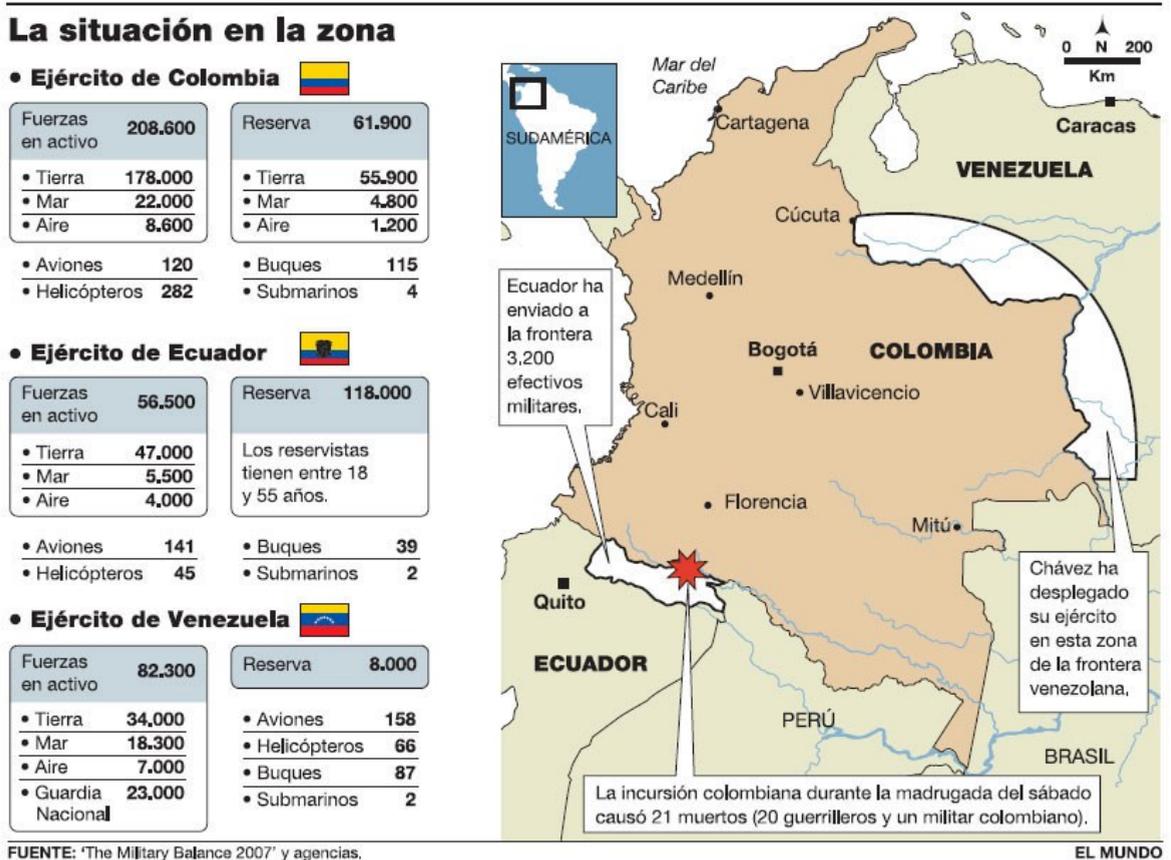
⁷ Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2003

⁸ Primera & Alandete, 2010

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was during this same decade that Colombia's armed forces (including military and police forces) grew from 300,000 to 446,000 troops, and acquired, among others: 24 fighter aircrafts (SU-30); 53 transport and attack helicopters, an anti-aircraft system of

during this period of tightening FARC-Venezuela relationships that Colombia's military active and reserve troops grew to be three times the size of its neighbour. The disparity, to this day, is massive (See Figure 3 for details).

Fig. 3. Accounts of Armed Forces Strengths for Colombia,



short to medium-range (Tor-M1); long-range Russian anti-aircraft missiles (SS-300); 100,000 assault rifles (7.62 AK103); 24 Russian aircrafts (SU-30MKV); and 25 Super Tucano aircrafts (AT-29B).⁹ It should be mentioned, at this juncture, that Colombia has benefitted greatly from US diplomatic and military aid ever since the turn of the century through the Plan Colombia initiative against drug cartels and terrorist groups. Even more, it was

Ecuador, and Venezuela

It would be naïve—and most likely a “chicken and egg” conundrum—to argue that this phenomenon, the increased connection between FARC and Venezuela, happened as a direct result of the increasing threat that Colombia's growing capabilities posed to Venezuela. It would overlook the fact that there appears to be an ideological convergence between the Venezuelan political project and the self-proclaimed communist ideology of FARC, and a variety of other interests Chavez and

⁹ “Medición de fuerzas militares entre Colombia y Venezuela,” 2008

his officials might have had when getting involved with the guerrilla. FARC is, after all, not only one of the richest terrorist groups in the world given its very active drug trafficking pursuits, but also one of the oldest and most capable insurgent groups in the region and the world. In other words, this security dilemma by proxy perspective is still relatively third image, so it is possible that it leaves a lot of other domestic factors unaccounted for.

Nonetheless, if we look at Colombia and Venezuela as unitary actors within an anarchic world, security dilemma conditions can be recognized. As Colombia has increased its military capabilities to deal with the various threats to its sovereignty that have arisen since the 60s, it has been slowly tipping the balance of power in its favour. By increasing the number of troops, aircrafts, helicopters, missile defence mechanisms, etc., and the proportion of government spending in defence, Colombia has climbed its way to a solid second spot behind the largest military power in the region, Brazil. In the meantime, Venezuela has grown its capabilities at a much slower, less pronounced pace. The threat of Colombia's military strength is palpable for Venezuela—considering the high levels of terrorist activities that occur close to the frontier, and the public demonstrations of power that these entail, it is no secret that Colombia's armed forces are superior regarding numbers and experience. 60 years of civil conflict do not come in vain. In a system where there is an inherent distrust of future intentions, Venezuela cannot be sure that those 446,000 troops and hundreds of aircrafts will never turn its way.

However, Venezuela is also not in a position to build up its capabilities. Beyond the chaos of the Venezuelan economy, which is a whole topic of its own that I will not delve into now, this would be an unwise move considering the

geopolitics of Venezuela's neighbourhood. Brazil, South America's biggest economic and military power, shares a long border with the Bolivarian state, and any significant attempt by the latter to ramp up its security might be misinterpreted by the Brazilians. Indeed, Venezuela has a less than ideal track record when it comes to clear communication of intentions—there have been too many diplomatic crises between Colombia and Venezuela over the years, and many politicians argue that the two states have come infinitesimally close to war through a purely rhetorical escalation of conflict. Venezuelan leadership, particularly Chavez and now Maduro, traps itself in convoluted rhetoric that hinders more than it helps. Brazil, which has managed to remain somewhat removed from the complicated personality politics between nations in South America, would most likely react adversely to a challenge to its regional military superiority.

As such, it is with these mechanisms in mind that the logic behind the Venezuela-Colombia-FARC security dilemma by proxy falls into place. Though Colombia has developed its capabilities to fight the insurgencies within its borders, defending itself from non-state actors and domestic aggressors, it has done so by increasing both its offensive and defensive capabilities. As such, the message it sends to Venezuela is complicated: they are fraternal nations at heart and in culture, but the structural operational capacities of its armed forces hint that this might not always be the case. As such, for the reasons outlined in the preceding paragraph, it behoves Venezuela to keep Colombia tangled up in its dealings with FARC and others for as long as possible—as long as civil conflict in Colombia keeps going, it is extremely unlikely that both the Colombian government and the Colombian people will even consider going to war (pre-emptively or

preventively) with Venezuela, for there are simply not enough resources for both conflicts. One could therefore argue that Venezuela has taken advantage of its potential ideological links with FARC (and the significant profit the organization may bring to its officials), to set up a proxy that seeks to limit Colombia's relative power without generating monumental uproar in the international community or unbalancing its relationship with the rest of its South American friends. This has come, of course, not without cost for Venezuela. The most recent crisis with Colombia occurred just a couple of months ago when President Maduro exiled hundreds of Colombian residents from his country for bringing in contraband, paramilitaries, and violence from across the border. However, these phenomena are unsurprising for anyone who has studied Colombian history. If there is anything one should know about the Colombian conflict, is that the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the drug traffickers are always somehow interlinked in abominable marriages of convenience—with one tend to come the others. The fact that Venezuela has established close links with FARC can only mean it has opened the door for all other kinds of criminals and has thereby undermined its own security. Indeed, another expression of the challenge of security dilemmas.

V. Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, I argued that intra-state conflict creates the conditions for a security dilemma between states but also provides a channel or proxy through which the threatened state can attempt to limit the threatening state's power without putting itself at risk: the domestic security threat itself. I engaged with Robert Jervis and Barry Posen's work on the security dilemma and investigated the relations between Colombia,

Venezuela, and FARC to demonstrate a possible case study of this phenomenon, the security dilemma by proxy.

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