The Internationalization of Illegal Armed Organizations: The Colombian case

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1. Introduction

Most of the literature treats as a matter of course that some conflicts become internationalized because they have crossed, almost unintentionally, a certain threshold marked by state boundaries. My more general research question takes as a matter of inquiry what others treat as an assumption: I explore if, when, how and why actors decide that domestic conflicts should have an international dimension. Actors capable of making this decision might be external, i.e. international organizations, superpowers, neighboring states, or internal, i.e. any of the parties to the conflict. The literature on the causes of foreign states and international organizations’ intervention in domestic conflicts is extensive. For various reasons, however, little effort has been dedicated to analyzing when the parties to the conflict will decide to internationalize their own struggle. Therefore, I am interested in exploring this specific dimension of the internationalization of civil conflicts. I am interested in observing and explaining how the international system constitutes a crucial constraint, but it also provides parties with opportunities that facilitate or hinder the decision to internationalize. Both constraints and opportunities are important to understanding domestic actors’ strategies in the Colombian armed conflict. This in turn presupposes that even though international forces shape and somehow limit the decision these domestic actors make, they have the ability and the space to make the decision of involving (or not involving) international agents in their domestic struggle. Parties’ decision to internationalize is conditioned or shaped by the international system but not determined by it: domestic actors have a substantial amount of autonomy in their decision about whether or not international actors should eventually participate in their conflict and under what conditions.

In this paper, I begin to explore why Colombian guerrilla groups internationalize (or not) their conflict when they do and why they do not make this sort of decision before these junctures. I also explain why both Colombian government and guerrilla adopt different and less stringent forms of internationalization than, for instance, they do in El Salvador and I try to describe, in the Colombian case, which processes lead to this variation of results.

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The Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces—FARC were born at the beginning of the 1960s. This insurgent organization was originally made up of Liberal guerrillas and peasant founders, included followers of the Colombian Communist Party. However, the organization was not a military wing of the Colombian Communist Party, a party that was perceived to be pro-Moscow. In spite of this influence, “the FARC by no means represented a transplanted, externally influenced insurrection, as the U.S. government had at times tried to convey” (Murillo 2004, p. 58). Other guerrilla groups also emerged during this period, including the National Liberation Army, or ELN, a Cuban-inspired movement founded in 1965 in stretches of the Middle Magdalena Valley in the northeastern department of Santander. The ELN was substantially different from the FARC to the extent it was not a genuine peasant movement. Instead, it drew its base of support from disaffected, urban, middle-class youth. Additionally, “its ideological formation came from a revolutionary brand of liberation theology personified by one of its most famous recruits, the priest Camilo Torres, killed in combat in 1966” (Murillo 2004, p. 59). It might be possible to suggest that the FARC is more similar to the Guatemalan URNG, since they both have a strong peasant component, while the ELN and the FMLN in El Salvador have a very similar urban middle-class base.

As it is to be expected, insurgent movements in Colombia followed different internationalization strategies. While the FARC is still the oldest guerrilla organization in the country, it has remained relatively more isolated from the international system and its dynamics than the other groups. Even though information about the international links of most insurgent organizations is still scattered, it is possible to observe that the FARC has been substantially more reluctant to accept the participation of international actors either in times of war or in times of peace. Groups such as the M-19, the EPL and the ELN had stronger ties with other governments in the region, especially with the Cuban revolution. I argue here that an important and crucial factor explains this difference: as I have stated, the M-19, the EPL and the ELN are more urban and ‘modern’ guerrillas, closer to the FMLN in El Salvador; the FARC have a stronger peasant component and its agenda is more driven by the Colombia’s country side problematic. Pizarro describes it in the following way:
“While all the groups that were born in the country following the Cuban example all have a *foquista* and voluntarism orientation—the Workers, Students and Peasants Movement (MOEC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL)—and a mainly urban origin from radicalized middle classes, communist guerrillas are born in an articulated way with peasant resistance against official violence. In that sense, they were guerrillas articulated to a political party (the Communist Party) but, in general, with deep social roots” (Pizarro Leongomez 1991, p. 20).

In other words, even though the FARC have no ethnic component, their origins and nature are closer to the UNRG in Guatemala and this local orientation accounts for its relatively permanent isolation from the international system. The URNG in Guatemala and the FARC in Colombia share a common feature: they have weaker links with the international system and its actors since their agendas and members have less in common, ideologically and strategically, with other revolutionary groups or governments in the area. They tend to see their conflicts as unique and to have a nationalist worldview.¹ Hence, they are more likely to fight their wars by themselves and to constantly try to avoid international third parties during peace processes.

More modern and urban guerrillas are more likely to articulate internationalization strategies and to communicate easily with other guerrilla movements or revolutionary governments that share their worldviews. This stock of common worldviews does not exist when guerrillas have strong local origins, are composed more by peasants or indigenous members than radicalized middle classes, and are highly nationalistic.

But there is an additional factor that also accounts for the FARC’s isolation and it is related to the internal structure of this insurgent organization. The FARC, as it was also the

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¹ I borrow Goldstein and Keohane’s definition of world views. They suggest that: “At the most fundamental level, ideas define the universe of possibilities for action. (…) These conceptions of possibility, or world views, are embedded in the symbolism of a culture and deeply affect modes of thought and discourse. They are not purely normative, since they include views about cosmology and ontology as well as about ethics. Nevertheless, world views are entwined with people’s conceptions of their identities, evoking deep emotions and loyalties. The world’s great religions provide world views; but so does the scientific rationality that is emblematic of modernity” (Goldstein & Keohane 1993, p. 8).
case of the URNG, is a very monolithic guerrilla. Even though it has attempted to construct alliances with other guerrilla organizations in Colombia, these have not lasted long. Hence, the lack of strong political and ideological division lines within the insurgent organization also contributes to explain why the FARC have not used internationalization as a way to negotiate and solve internal disputes.

However, this trend changed when the insurgent movement identified resources it could obtain from the international system and that could eventually improve its political and military position vis-à-vis the Colombian state. This process took place due to the peace process with president Pastrana and the high levels of exposure to the international system and its actors the insurgent organization experienced. Simultaneously, this identification of international opportunities took place when the guerrilla started to perceive that they were in a disadvantaged situation, militarily and politically, and hence they opted for political or military internationalization. This is why it is after the arrival of Plan Colombia and the peace process with president Pastrana that the FARC started to implement in a more systematic manner its campaign to find international recognition as a belligerent force. Furthermore, it is during the Uribe administration, when it is broadly perceived that the Armed Forces are military stronger than the FARC, that this insurgent organization began to strengthen its liaisons with left-wing governments in the area such as Venezuela and Nicaragua. In other words, even though the strong peasant component of the FARC would, in general, predict the lack of an internationalization strategy by this group, this trend can be altered by a serious change in the military balance of power between the state and the insurgent organization and furthermore, it can be altered by exposure to international actors and the advantages of forming alliances with them. This exposure took place precisely during the peace process with the Pastrana administration. I will describe how both the FARC and the ELN differ in terms of their internationalization strategies and how those strategies have evolved.

**FARC**

Officially, the FARC’s internationalization strategy began in their 8th Conference on April 2nd 1993 when this insurgent group created the ‘Comisión Internacional’ (International Commission). According to their conclusions, the commission had the purpose of
“strengthening the friendship among socialist countries, dedicating its efforts to spread the organization’s image and projects, in order to contribute to the recognition of their struggle” (2000). However, in 1996 the FARC’s internationalization project suffered a radical change. During this year, the FARC Secretariat decided to augment its international relations and it started by strengthening the structure of the International Commission and changing its name to International Front. Its objective was to have a solid infrastructure that would allow it to go from simple and clandestine approaches with leftist movements and parties, to openly contact governments and parties in other countries.

As it happened with domestic fronts, the Estado Mayor, having some autonomy from the Secretariat, formed the international front. At that time, Raul Reyes was commissioned to be in charge of this front and as part of his assignment, he lived some years in Costa Rica and from there, he coordinated contacts with organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The International Front was sub-divided in three areas: Central and South America, North America and Europe. The first purpose, as it was stated, was to obtain international recognition in the form of a status of belligerence. The second objective was to obtain logistic support, mainly through neighboring states such as Panama, Ecuador, Venezuela and Peru. The North American front was in charge of obtaining economic resources from various non governmental agencies, mainly in Canada. In Europe, however, the FARC had started to be present only recently (4 years ago) while the ELN, as I will describe, has been constructing alliances in that region for a longer period of time. Among other tactics, the FARC had “exploited sensitive topics such as human rights and environment. (…) They have relations with most of the European social-democratic governments such as Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, France and Spain. The FARC have ‘permanent embassies’ in 15 countries of the world (2000).

However, the government and the media in Colombia might have exaggerated the FARC’s international linkages since information has always been scattered. This exaggeration serves both parties to the conflict. If the FARC are presented as an insurgent group with numerous international linkages, the government can argue that this organization is transnational in its character and, therefore, it requires a transnational response or effort against it. In other words, framing the FARC as part of a transnational criminal network
justifies and legitimizes the government’s own attempt to construct international alliances to fight against the FARC. But the FARC also benefits from overplaying its international profile. It allows the organization to state that even though the Cold War is over and most of the revolutionary experiments have failed, they can still find organizations, parties and even governments, willing to support and legitimize their cause. If they can show that some agents in the international system still approve of their fight, they can prove their objectives and methods are not as isolated, outdated and parochial as the government constantly portrays them.

Even though Colombian media and the government tend to overemphasize FARC’s international liaisons, this organization has not used an internationalization strategy as systematically as the Salvadorian FMLN did. Additionally, information about FARC’s links with international actors is rare and spare since Colombia’s war is still not over and interviews or primary resources are not available. There is, however, some recent information related to their international activity that it is worth registering. This information points to still not very clear links between the FARC and governments in neighboring countries such as Venezuela and Ecuador. In this paper I will describe, chronologically, FARC’s attempts to construct these and other international alliances.

**Internationalization toward Venezuela**

In January 1998, the FARC announced the creation of a new political movement: they called it Movimiento Bolivariano para la Nueva Colombia (Bolivarian Movement for the New Colombia) (AFP and Reuters 1998). FARC’s Bolivarian platform was very close to the Bolivarian project president Chávez has also tried to promote from his administration in neighboring Venezuela. This ideological compatibility has been accompanied by other friendly gestures from the Venezuelan government toward the Colombian insurgent organization. For instance, just a couple of months after the inauguration of FARC’s Bolivarian movement, Chávez declared publicly that “if a guerrilla column retreats and arrives to (the Venezuelan town of) Guasdualito (in Apure—a province that borders with Arauca, a Colombian province) and gives up his arms and ask for asylum, we will give it to them. And maybe I will talk to them and convince them that peace is the right path” (1999).

Since then, the press in both countries started a debate on Chávez intention to recognize the
belligerent status to insurgent movements in Colombia. These attempts repeated various times and the relationship between the Venezuelan government and the insurgent organization only intensified over time. For instance, during peace talks with the Pastrana administration, the FARC officially invited president Chávez to San Vicente del Caguán, the capital of the Détente Zone, so he could meet with ‘Sure-shot’, the FARC’s head commander. However, Pastrana’s government did not allow this trip (Cristancho 1999). FARC’s Commander Ariel even traveled to Caracas to contact Chávez and members of the Venezuelan political class, legislators and media establishment to make official FARC’s invitation to the Venezuelan president (Cristancho 1999).

The FARC kept their contacts with the Venezuelan government and just a week after they rejected the verification commission, Chávez declared he was willing to open conversations with the FARC, “in order to obtain a higher level of security for the Venezuelan people. It is our duty.” His Minister of Foreign Affairs supported Chávez position by arguing that the Venezuelans “are sovereign and we can meet with whomever we want in Venezuela” (Cristancho 1999). Just days after, the Colombian government reacted through his ambassador and affirmed that any international support to the peace process should be coordinated with the Colombian government and should not constitute an inappropriate intervention in Colombia’s domestic issues (1999). Clearly, the Colombian government was not willing to let the FARC advance its own political internationalization strategy. Later and after knowing about the presence of FARC members at a conference on Plan Colombia in Caracas, the Colombian government had to call his ambassador for consultations to send Venezuela a strong message on its discomfort with the president’s attitude (2000).

Additionally, by 2002, the FARC presence in Venezuelan territory was denounced in more detail. The Venezuelan Military Intelligence Direction (DIM), stated that about 740 illegally armed men and women, members of various Colombian guerrillas, were in Venezuelan territory (Mayorca 2002). Later in the year, it was also known that the Venezuelan government gave visas to Pedro Elías Cañas, one of ELN’s head commanders, and Aldo Moscoso, a FARC member, so they could remain legally in the country. The report
also pointed out that these were not the only guerrilla members who had been authorized entrance to Venezuelan territory (Corresponsal 2002).

**Military Internationalization: Various Actors**

In 2000, another demonstration of military internationalization between the FARC and a neighboring country came to light. The Peruvian National Intelligence Service (SIN) confiscated Ten thousand Kalashnikov rifles and Russian AKM. The weapons were going to be dropped for the FARC from an airplane at the Peruvian-Colombian border. When this illegal network from Jordan, through Peru and with a final destination in the Colombian jungle was discovered, Vladimiro Montesinos—the most important adviser to Peruvian president Fujimori—declared that corrupted members of the Peruvian army might have participated in the transaction (2000). However, the Jordanian government replied to Montesinos and affirmed that the weapons were legally sold to the Peruvian government and the initial transaction had nothing to do with the FARC (2000). Later it was known that Montesinos himself participated in the transaction and that he negotiated with the FARC the delivery of the weapons (Reuters 2000).

In August too, the FARC implemented military internationalization to obtain logistic support from members of the IRA (Irish Republican Army). A group of them were captured in Bogotá after spending about five weeks in the Détente Zone. According to the press, the Irish men were experts in home made mortars, rocket-launchers and, remote-control detonators and they were actively supporting the FARC's attempt to strengthen their urban strategies (Justicia and Internacional 2001). In May 2002, Martin McCauley, James William Monaghan and Niall Connolly were freed and left the country (Semana 3/5/04).

**Political De-internationalization during the Peace Process**

The FARC was, in general, not very receptive to the international community’s participation during peace talks with the Pastrana government. In spite of the fact that the government convinced them about the benefits of an international Group of Friends, the FARC always insisted that they should not act as verifiers; they would accompany the process but, the FARC insisted, they should not be powerful actors at the negotiations table (1999). FARC’s Commander Raul Reyes, subscribing a highly nationalistic reading of the Colombian conflict stated that “the FARC does not accept, under any circumstances, an
instance or a commission coming from the international community that puts pressure to solve the conflict. It has to be Colombian. Colombian problems, including the conflict, can be solved by Colombians. We need to be able to do it” (1999). By August 6, the FARC made public they did not accept an international commission for verification (Paz 1999); the commission was finally formed by Colombian personalities and the dialogues resumed in September (1999). Nationalism, as a world view, was deeply ingrained in the FARC’s perception of the Colombian conflict.

The organization was also rejecting additional forms of internationalization such as the one related to international organizations. When the Uribe’s administration began in August 2002, one of his proposals was to invite the United Nations to participate in eventual peace dialogues and in the liberation of hostages in exchange of imprisoned guerrilla members. In this opportunity, the FARC made clear its position toward this international organization. In a communiqué, this group affirmed they did not agree with the participation of the U.N. because they were not consulted on this matter and also, because “to negotiate, both parties are always needed.” They also declared that when dialogues ended, it was clear for them that the United Nations and the broader international community took the government’s side and hence, they did not trust them anymore (2002).

They also opposed Plan Colombia, the most important component of the government’s military internationalization strategy. A crucial consequence of Plan Colombia’s final approval was observed at the negotiation table with the FARC. The arrival of the aid package undermined and hindered discussions between the government and insurgents who thought this was a clear U.S. intervention in domestic affairs and, it sent mixed signals about the government’s peace intentions. Ivan Ríos, one of the FARC’s head commanders, reacted strongly:

“We do not agree with Plan Colombia because it was discussed neither in Colombia, nor at the negotiations table, and because it is a plan for war (…). Hundreds of peasants are going to arm themselves because they are going to be attacked… when the helicopters arrive we are going to shoot them down… This is very dangerous because it undermines the peace process” (2000).
Tirofijo added:
“The FARC disagrees with this aid from the United States because assistance should be for social spending and peace, not for increasing the conflict with the blessing of the few who directly benefit from the war (…). The security forces can attack us when the President considers it convenient, since we are an organization that has taken up arms against the state. But it’s wrong that they should do this with the participation of the United States, under the slanderous pretext that we have links to the drug trade” (Ruiz 2001, p. 248).

Pablo Beltrán, an ELN leader, also complained about Plan Colombia:

“the White House aid is supposedly for the fight against drug trafficking, but it is really for the armed forces. (…) How can they expect us to disarm when they’re reinforcing the army? Our fight will have to grow, and we will not disarm” (Ruiz 2001, p. 248).

The FARC declared that they recognized the official beginning of Plan Colombia as the simultaneous beginning of a new chapter in their war against the Colombian state: they launched a cruel military offensive in nine different provinces on the day the Plan was inaugurated. The insurgency quickly understood that Plan Colombia was an internationalization strategy designed by the government to improve its military position and as such, it constantly opposed it.

Additional Contacts
On December 16th 2004, unidentified men took Rodrigo Granda, from a cafe in Caracas, Venezuela. Later, the Colombian government announced his "capture" in the last week of December. Uribe initially claimed that Granda, who had represented the FARC in its negotiations with the Colombian government, had been captured inside Colombia, in a town near the border with Venezuela. Later, it was known that renegade Venezuelan Army officers who were paid by the Colombian government kidnapped the Colombian rebel leader. The Colombian government finally admitted that a ransom was handed out for the capture of
the FARC leader. This incident led to a crisis between the two countries: Venezuela retired its ambassador in Bogotá and demanded an apology. It also suspended diplomatic bilateral ties with Colombia.

In January 2005, after Granda was captured (he was until his capture the so-called FARC’s ‘Chancellor’) he told the press he contacted an organization in Libya called Mataba, “an anti-imperialist, anti-Semitic, anti-colonialist organization created by Gadhafi. According to Granda, the FARC had an International Commission in charge of informing various international sectors about the domestic conflict, the FARC’s position vis-à-vis the Colombian state and, Uribe’s frequent violations to human rights. He also revealed that various individuals in different countries, some non-governmental organizations, friends and sympathizers financed this commission. The commission also participated, according to Granda, in international events in order to open new spaces and to find more concrete commitments and support from other countries (2005).

Granda also revealed a new dimension of FARC’s relationship with the Venezuelan government of Chávez. He declared that he participated in the Congreso Bolivariano de los Pueblos (People’s Bolivarian Convention) that gathered about 600 people. Being a self-defined Bolivarian movement, the FARC wanted to be included in this new South American effort. However, some participants expressed their concern about FARC’s involvement, since they were attempting to consolidate a democratic leftist movement, a new International Socialist, in which armed illegal groups should not be welcome. That was the case of the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil and its leader Lula Da Silva (2005).

In February 2005 another international connection was revealed by the press: the FARC supported the Paraguayan extreme left organization Patria Libre in the kidnapping and later assassination of Cecilia Cubas—ex-president Raul Cuba’s daughter. Osmar Martínez, one of the Patria Libre’s leaders was captured and confessed that he received instructions and FARC training to execute the abduction. When Martínez was captured at his place, the police found FARC’s propagandistic material, uniforms and a video where a person with a Colombian accent was imparting instructions in a kidnap simulation (2005).

Finally, in September 2008, Sebastian Piñera—the main opposition leader in Chile at that time and a member of the center-right National Renewal (RN) party, traveled to Bogota
and met with president Álvaro Uribe. Uribe handed him a report that described a series of e-mail exchanges between a Mapuche activist and FARC’s commander Raúl Reyes. The Mapuche leader was identified as ‘Roque’ and he asked the FARC, in 2006, for military training to indigenous groups. These Chilean groups want to recover southern lands they consider belong to them as part of their ancestral rights; but those lands currently belong to powerful business men and big national and multinational companies (2008).

**Venezuela as a Mediator during the Uribe Administration**

Uribe’s government rejected Chávez’s request for permission to meet Tirofijo in Colombian territory to facilitate a humanitarian agreement to liberate hostages (2007). The government wanted to hinder in every possible way the consolidation of the FARC’s political internationalization move. Colombian Congresswoman, Piedad Córdoba, decided then to travel and meet FARC’s commander Raul Reyes to negotiate the humanitarian agreement. She came back with a video sent to Hugo Chávez who, together with senator Córdoba, was finally designated as a mediator between the insurgent group and the government. Reyes suggested Chávez to agree upon a meeting between the Venezuelan president and members of the FARC’s General Secretariat (Lares 2007).

In November 2007, Chávez met with Iván Márquez, a member of the FARC’s General Secretariat, senator Córdoba and unknown French government’s envoys (2007). In this meeting, they insisted on a Chávez-Marulanda summit and advanced on details on the humanitarian agreement (2007). On January 9th 2008, the first group of hostages was liberated. Venezuelan Minister of Interior, Rodríguez Chacín, travelled to the site of the liberation, somewhere in the southern Colombian jungles. Colombia and Venezuela’s public watched live from the site how the Venezuelan Minister was friendly and affectionate with the group of insurgents that liberated the hostages and even called them ‘comrades’ and encouraged them to ‘continue the fight.’ One of his staffers was wearing a Ché Guevara shirt; the type of shirt FARC guerrillas constantly wear when they appear in public. The Venezuelan public T.V. network, TELESUR, was broadcasting live and exclusively at the scene of the liberation. Less than a week later and before Venezuela’s National Assembly, Chávez asked the international community to remove the ‘terrorist’ label when referring to the FARC or the ELN as a pre-condition to ‘normalize’ diplomatic relations between Bogotá
and Caracas. He asserted: “We need to give recognition to the FARC and the ELN, they are insurgent forces with a political project, they have a Bolivarian project that we respect here” (2008).

**The Search for the Belligerent Status**

Again, the FARC saw in international actors, among them Chávez, an opportunity to be recognized as a belligerent group now that the Colombian Armed Forces, reinforced through American military and intelligence support, were forcing them to retreat. Even thought it was implemented more consistently in this period, the project of finding belligerent status was an old one. *El Tiempo* newspaper had found, years before Plan Colombia, a document in which the FARC presented the legal and political reasons why they should be recognized as belligerent; simultaneously, a letter sent by a group of European intellectuals and legislators also recommended the government to acknowledge the FARC as a belligerent group (Paz 1999). Additionally, Carlos Alberto Plotter, a demobilized guerrilla member, stated in numerous occasions that the “FARC are truly concerned about their status of belligerence and that is why they are paying attention to the international realm” (2003).

Later, in October 2007, the FARC contacted U.S. senators James McGovern, Bill Delahunt and Gregory Meeks to set up a meeting and talk about the humanitarian agreement (2008). They were using foreign hostages such as the American contractors and Ingrid Betancourt (a French-Colombian citizen), as instruments to contact foreign governments and obtain their recognition of their group as a belligerent force. The FARC had clearly advanced a campaign in order to obtain not only legal recognition as a belligerent force, but also in order to obtain legitimacy from the Venezuelan government. In this sense and ironically, the kidnapping of foreign nationals, a practice that delegitimizes insurgent organizations because it goes against International Humanitarian Law, was used as an internationalization mechanism to find political support and recognition from external actors.

**Reyes’ Computer: Internationalization toward Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua**

Different versions and rumors of the linkages between the FARC and the Ecuatorian government of Rafael Correa began to circulate when in October 2006, as a presidential candidate, Correa publicly declared that the FARC was not a terrorist organization but a guerrilla movement. He also insisted that the FARC was not the only party committing
excesses in the war, but that the Colombian Armed Forces were doing exactly the same (2006). Less than a month later, Colombia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carlos Holguín, said in a radio interview that there was solid proof that FARC’s head commander, Raúl Reyes, was in Ecuadorian territory and that the guerrillas were using that country as a shelter (2006).

In March 2008 the Colombian government bombed a FARC’s camp located in Ecuadorian territory, close to the border with Colombia. Reyes, as Holguín announced, was there and killed in the operation. The Colombian armed forces confiscated a series of laptops and disks where the Interpol, the FBI and the Colombian government found valuable information. First, there were a series of e-mail exchanges where it was clear that the FARC met with Ecuadorian Minister of Defense, Gustavo Larrea who acted as President Correa’s representative. There, Raúl Reyes reported that the Ecuatorian government was interested in making ‘official’ its relationship with the FARC, it wanted to coordinate social activities to help the border population, and it wanted to exchange information on paramilitary delinquency in Ecuadorian territory. In the e-mail Reyes informed that Larrea was willing to remove public force’s members that are hostile to the FARC and also recognize the belligerent status to the FARC. There was an additional e-mail in which Reyes told the General Secretariat that the Ecuadorian government offered to invite a Secretariat member to Quito to talk about the humanitarian exchange, border policy, the political solution to the conflict, Ingrid Betancourt and the role of president Hugo Chávez.

In another e-mail, Reyes proposed to the Secretariat releasing some hostages to Chávez while they wait for a humanitarian agreement with Uribe. The purpose, according to the message, is to encourage other ‘friendly’ governments to recognize their belligerent status. By unilaterally liberating some hostages, asserts Reyes, they might strengthen Chávez’s position and that would benefit the FARC. Various e-mails also revealed that president Chávez received a thousand million pesos from the FARC when he was in jail after attempting a coup d’état in his country. Evidence in the computers also showed that during the last semester of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, the FARC received at least US$300 million from Chávez (2008). After Reyes was killed in Ecuador, Chávez held a national minute of silence; he described Reyes as a ‘good revolutionary’ in a national televised speech.
and talked about the operation by the Colombian army as a ‘coward assassination’ (Peñaloza 2008).

In September 2008, the U.S. Department of State acknowledged the links between the FARC and the Venezuelan government by expelling the Venezuelan ambassador in that country and simultaneously announcing the inclusion of Ramón Rodríguez, ex-Minister of Interior in Venezuela, in the Clinton List—a list designed to identify all enterprises and people related, in different ways, with drug traffic activities. The inclusion was the result of existing and proved links between Rodríguez, other Venezuelan officers and close supporters of Hugo Chávez and the FARC. Concretely, they were accused of arming, encouraging and financing the FARC, a guerrilla organization that the U.S. defines as a terrorist group of drug traffickers. Washington accused Rodríguez of being the “main contact for weapons traffic in the Venezuelan government and for facilitating a US$250 million loan from the Venezuelan government to the FARC at the end of 2007” (Gomez Maseri 2008).

Two people survived the bombing by the Colombian government to the FARC’s camp and they remained for some weeks in Ecuador. Two months after Raúl Reyes death, the Nicaraguan government conceded political asylum to these two women and the Ecuadorian government authorized them to leave the country and travel to the Central American country. This provoked yet another diplomatic crisis among these three governments since it was later proved that these two women were active FARC members and they were being sheltered by the Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega (2008). The women still remained in Managua and they usually accompany Ortega in public settings and demonstrations. Months later, Ortega invited various other FARC members to join him in the celebration of the Sandinista Revolution anniversary. Even though Colombia asked the Interpol to circulate a note letting judicial authorities know about the guerrilla members trip, no one was captured (2008) (2008). Later and again, thanks to Reyes’s computer, it was known that Alberto Bermudez, a member of the FARC’s international commission, had met with Miguel D’Escoto—back then Nicaraguan Minister of Foreign Affairs and currently the Nicaraguan Ambassador to the U.N.—and he expressed interest in meeting with members of the General Secretariat. Additionally, according to some of the e-mails found in the computer, Ortega was serving as an intermediary between the FARC and the Libyan
government in a transaction that would allow the insurgent organization to buy anti-aerial missiles to react against the U.S.-Colombian aerial operations (Justicia 2008).

**The Participation of Switzerland and the Gotard Affair**

In July 2008 another debate on the role of international actors in the Colombian conflict began. This time the central figure was Jean Pierre Gotard, a Swiss citizen who had been acting as a mediator for the liberation of hostages with the authorization of the Colombian government. Gotard, an external adviser for the Swiss government, visited in numerous occasions the Détente Zone during the peace process with the Pastrana administration and he convinced the FARC to liberate two foreigners. The Colombian government found evidence of this transaction in Reyes’s computer: Gotard appeared there as the bearer of US$500,000 that the government confiscated from the FARC in San José de Costa Rica. Apparently, this was the amount of money it paid to the FARC for the liberation of these two people. But the Colombian government found more evidence of Gotard’s relationship with the FARC: he was a professor of many Colombian students in Switzerland, among them, the son of ‘Alfonso Cano’, FARC’s main head commander after Tirofijo’s death in 2008 (2008). The Colombian Attorney General decided to open a formal judicial process and to call Gotard to give testimony, but only hours after, the Swiss government asked the Colombian government “to cease its attacks against Gotard” (2008). Colombian Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos had accused Gotard, some Swiss non-governmental organizations and the Swiss government itself, of supporting the FARC, or at least, of allowing them to enter and exit the country easily (Afp 2007).

Also due to the computer content, both Colombian and European authorities identified 8 citizens from different European countries, key elements of FARC’s international network. They captured a Spanish citizen and fully identified other three Spanish collaborators. In the list there is also a Danish citizen who was in charge of contacts in Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen and also in charge of Anncol, FARC’s internet information service. Some of the information in the computer suggests that he also helped the FARC contact labor unions in Denmark and obtain resources for the organization from the Sweden government and from labor unions in the U.K. (Investigativa 2008). Two Italian
citizens—alias Ramón and Consuelo—that belong to the re-founded Communist Party in Italy publically accepted they had a political relation with the FARC (2008).

In spite of increasing evidence, analysts coincide in suggesting that the FARC actually does not have an International Front: “It is still a very parochial guerrilla. These are just small enclaves of supporters, it is nothing, it does not count. Any other guerrilla in the world has had people, commandants that produced texts and theoretical analysis that seduced people outside (...) Even in Cambodia with the Pol Pot, there was intellectuals, even French intellectuals, that said this was a guerrilla who wanted to reinvent the human being. I have never seen an intellectual text, by analysts saying that these FARC people are going to create a new society (Soto 2008). In conclusion, even though this insurgent organization has increasingly contacted international actors during the last decade, its efforts still do not amount to the parallel diplomacy the Salvadorian FMLN implemented during the 1980s.

**ELN**

During the 70s, the first group in designing a clear international strategy with concrete goals was the ELN. The strategy was published in 1989 in a document called ‘*Cartilla de Trabajo Internacional*’. The group highlighted in these documents what the ELN called ‘*Colectivo de Trabajo Internacional*’ which was “oriented not only toward obtaining solidarity, but also to add other elements of political and diplomatic struggle, overcoming the national framework in order to conquer international recognition for the revolutionary project and to facilitate the relationship with other states and political forces. International work broadens political frontiers and contributes to the process of force accumulation” (2000). The original headquarters of the *Colectivo de Trabajo Internacional* were located in Cuba at the end of 1990. This is considered the first diplomatic stage of the ELN. During this phase they started contacting subversive movements and politicians through the continent. Due to geographic proximity the first ones in the list of contacts were Central American organizations such as the FMLN and the URNG.

The second phase of the *Colectivo* started at the end of 1991 and it was directed to strengthening and broadening relationships with South America. The first ones were insurgent organizations such as *Túpac Amaru* in Perú and the *Movimiento Revolucionario*
*Patria Libre* from Paraguay. However, work with leftist groups in South America was broader than in Central America and strategically more important. The third and last phase was marked by the Third Congress of the ELN in 1996, considered the most important international phase of this guerrilla organization (2000).

**Political Internationalization: Germany**

But even before the internationalization strategy took shape in the form of this *colectivo*, the ELN started its contacts with the German government. The relationship between Helmut Kohl and the ELN started in 1983 when this insurgent group was militarily weak and had no financial support of any sort. The ELN, in sum, was about to disappear. At this moment, one of the most important German oil companies—Manessmann—arrived in Colombia to construct the Caño-Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline. The ELN kidnapped four engineers from that company and demanded a millionaire ransom. Nobody in Colombia ever knew the exact amount of money the company paid for the release of the hostages but it is said that it was about 8 million dollars. The company paid four million to the ELN directly and the rest was paid in social and educational investment, health, roads, and water systems in the areas where the company just started to function. Some media versions point out that in the negotiation with the company, the ELN even asked the Germans to attach to their cars a label saying ‘Manessmann has a heart for the children.’ Thanks to Manessmann’s resources the ELN revived.

After this kidnapping, Helmut Kohl decided to ask his Minister of State—Bernd Schmidbauer—to be in charge of the issue. He hired a couple of spies—Werner Mauss and his wife Isabel—to negotiate with the ELN. They arrived in Colombia in July 1983. Mauss and the *elenos* sympathized immediately. The Mauss negotiated with the ELN and made them promised that they will not kidnap more Manessmann workers. But soon enough, in May 1988, they kidnapped two German consuls, two Swiss officials, a French diplomat, a Sweden social worker and six journalists (included two foreign correspondents). This was all part of an oil nationalization campaign called ‘Vida y Soberanía Manuel Gustavo Chacón.’ At the end of 1988, and as a result of negotiations, an insurgent delegation traveled to Germany, visited the German parliament and European human rights organizations.
The Mauss couple was commissioned to work in another country from 1990 until 1995 and this lowered the profile of the relationship between the insurgent group and the German government. But during the summer of 1995 the Mauss couple went back to Colombia, obeying Schmidbauer’s orders to explore the ELN’s willingness to negotiate with the Samper administration. The Mauss returned to Germany with a draft document about peace and the ELN’s petition to coordinate another trip to Europe. As a result, at the beginning of 1996, Antonio García and 18 guerrilla men traveled to Spain, Switzerland, France, Italy, Netherlands and Norway. They also visited the Vatican where the Catholic Church blessed the initiation of the peace process and the Vatican was invited to participate in the project. The president of the German Episcopalian conference, Karl Lehman, was designated to accomplish this mission. The dialogues between Germany and Colombia continued during the summer of 1996. As Horacio Serpa—Colombian Minister of Interior during Samper’s administration—narrates it, “during that time, we met twice with chancellor Schmidbauer, the Colombian ambassador in Germany and the Mauss. We had a private lunch to analyze the ELN’s proposal. That same meeting took place in New York when president Samper participated in a U.N. General Assembly meeting. I think that at that moment there was a lot of interest from the German government to encourage the peace process with the ELN” (1999).

The relationship between the German government and the ELN took a drastic turn also in 1996 and contributed to the military revival of the insurgent movement after a long period of crisis. During this year, the ELN kidnapped the German citizen, Brigitte Schönne, the wife of former Basf’s\(^2\) president in Colombia. They requested a ransom of 1.5 million dollars and through a process that is still not publicly known, the German government was involved and later decided to support the ELN in its attempt to find a political solution to the conflict. This happened at the end of the Samper administration and Germany’s participation in the Colombian peace process was an important part of the international platform for Helmut Kohl’s reelection. The Mauss went to Colombia to try to negotiate with the ELN the liberation of Brigitte Schönne and when they were going on board of an airplane in Rionegro,

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\(^2\) BASF is a German chemical company and its portfolio ranges from chemicals, plastics, performance products, agricultural products and fine chemicals to crude oil and natural gas.
Antioquia, the Mauss couple were detained by the anti-kidnapping police and accused by the General Attorney’s office of kidnapping for ransom. The Mauss went to jail and the peace process was suspended. They were released after spending 8 months in prison and thanks to various diplomatic efforts from the German government.

In July 1998, the Kohl government, the Mauss and the German church organized a meeting in a monastery called Puerta del Cielo with Colombian civil society representatives and with ELN representatives. Pablo Beltrán, third in command in the ELN, guided the conversations. However, they were running out of time and the imminent triumph of the opposition party led by Andrés Pastrana made the ELN suspend the dialogues with the then lame duck government of Ernesto Samper. With Andrés Pastrana as the president in Colombia and Gerhard Schröeder as Chancellor in Germany, the peace efforts ended: “Neither Pastrana wanted to know about Samper’s allies, nor Schroeder wanted to know about Kohl’s” (1999).

In April 1999, right at the beginning of Pastrana’s administration, the ELN hijacked an Avianca domestic flight with 46 passengers and crew on board. Just one month later, this same insurgent group attempted to kidnap an entire congregation at La Maria church in Cali and escaped with 63 people. As a response, the government suspended peace talks with the ELN and revoked its political status. During this time, Schmidtbauer—now a congressman, the Mauss and Nicolás Bautista alias Gabino, met in Germany to try to convince the international community and the church that the ELN kidnap of church attendants pursued only a political end: to press for negotiations with the Pastrana administration (1999; 1999). Gabino in an attempt to politically internationalize negotiations, conditioned the liberation of hostages to the participation of Germany in the peace process: they made this request to Guillermo Fernández, Colombia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, and both parties finally agreed upon the participation of three German legislators. Bern Schmidtbauer, Karen Karatham y Frantz Henpel would represent the German government and, the governor of the Venezuelan province of Zulia, Francisco Arias, and Venezuelan Ambassador in Colombia, Fernando Gerbasi, would represent the Venezuelan government. A Spanish diplomat and ex-Ambassador in Colombia, Yago Pico de Coaña, would also be present in the negotiations (1999) (1999). The German government neither accepted nor refused the involvement of the
congressmen in the process of liberating the hostages but did not accept additional involvement (Cano Correa 1999).

By June 1999, the links between the ELN and various German governmental officers became again, subject of debate. A special report published by Semana—a weekly magazine of national circulation—elaborated on the nature of the relationship between Germany and the ELN. It highlighted that these links had been active for about 17 years and that both the ELN and the Germans had their own interests in this alliance. For the ELN, the main objective was to open the European Union doors in order to obtain political recognition from its governments and from different human rights organizations in the old continent. Facts have demonstrated, according to the publication, that the ELN has taken great steps in this direction.

*The Group of Friends during the Pastrana Peace Process*

After many families paid millionaire ransoms and the government and the ELN negotiated an agreement, the hostages were liberated and the peace negotiations continued. The parties agreed upon inviting further involvement from the international community through a Group of Friends composed by five countries that would serve as facilitators. They would give strength and security to the various commitments that parties would eventually agree upon, and they would serve as honor witness of those agreements the parties construct. The group would also be in charge of humanitarian tasks, advising, logistic, political and financial support, and when it was required, it would serve as mediator (2000). In July 2000, the government and the ELN designated France, Spain, Norway, Switzerland and Cuba as members of the Group of Friends (2000). In August, the parties wrote a document in which they specified the parameters the Group of Friends would follow during the peace process (Paz 2000).

After various periods of crisis, the ELN and the government continued talks in Havana thanks in part to the direct mediation of president Fidel Castro (2002). In May 2002, Pastrana suspended peace talks with the ELN, claiming that they were not committed to peace. The peace process was postponed until the new president would be elected.

*Mexico*
In June 2004, the Uribe administration attempted, for the first time, to establish negotiations with this insurgent group. Both ELN and government agreed upon requesting the Mexican president Vicente Fox to act as a mediator for an initial round of negotiations (2004). Less than a year later, in April 2005, Mexico unilaterally decided to finish its mission as mediator in the process. The decision was the result of various events but the most immediate one was a letter written by the ELN Central Command in which they criticized Mexico’s decision to vote against Cuba in the U.N. Human Rights Commission and the anti-democratic official posture against Manuel Pérez Obrador, after the presidential elections of that year. But the ELN had previously complained about the Mexican mediation since it considered that the Mexican government was closer to the government’s position than to that of their own. The tone of the complaint and the constant ambiguity by the Colombian government left the Mexican government no choice but to leave the negotiation table (2005). In spite of this, negotiations continued and even went beyond the exploration phase. In December 2005 both parties decided to advance toward the definition of a negotiation agenda (Lopez de Guereno 2005). By August 2007 dialogues were suspended and resumed in November 2007 when Venezuelan president Chavez acted as a mediator.

**Venezuela**

Even president Pastrana recognized that during negotiations, the ELN was substantially more open than the FARC to the participation of international actors (Pastrana 2005, p. 78; Pastrana 2006, p. 78). But the ELN was also contacting actors outside of the negotiations itself. The organization strengthened its relationship with neighboring countries, especially with Venezuela: in October 1998, Andres Oppenheimer and Tim Johnson from the Miami Herald published an article in which they denounced the existing links between Chávez and insurgent groups such as the ELN in Colombia. They revealed the existence of a connection between high profile Venezuelan intelligence officers and FARC commanders and, provided evidence of at least a dozen meetings since 1996. But the main contacts,

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3 Pérez Obrador held the position of Mayor of Mexico City from 2000 to 2005, before resigning in July 2005 to contend the 2006 presidential election, representing the Coalition for the Good of All, a PRD-led coalition that also includes the Convergence party and the Labor Party. In 2006 the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) announced the final vote count in the 2006 presidential election, resulting in a narrow margin of 0.56 percentage points of victory for his opponent, Felipe Calderón. López Obrador appealed against the results and mobilized large protests against the election. However, on 5 September 2006, the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TEPJF) ruled that the election was fair and that Felipe Calderón was winner and would become President of Mexico.
according to the article, were with the ELN and started in 1995 when Chávez and Nicolás Rodríguez—alias Gabino, met in Arauca, a border province in Colombia. The article also mentioned an intercepted communication between ELN head commanders of the Armando Cacua and the Domingo Lain fronts. The ELN denied the existence of any of these contacts though (1998).

Finally, in February 2008 the ELN sent a communiqué in which they asserted they have been complying with International Humanitarian Law and therefore, they should be recognized as a belligerent force. This was a straight response to Venezuelan President Chavez, who after facilitating the liberation of an important group of FARC hostages suggested the FARC and ELN should be granted status as a belligerent force. The ELN argued that “the organization fulfilled the requirements on the humanization of the conflict and it fulfilled International Humanitarian Law” (2008).

6. Conclusions

Even though none of the Colombian guerrilla organizations was as internationalized as the Salvadorian FMLN, it is important to highlight that those with a strong urban middle class component and origins related to the Cuban revolution were more likely to develop links with international actors. The FARC, even though a Marxist organization, had a wide peasant base and adopted in a more systematic way nationalist world views, both in peace and war. Hence, it is an organization more reticent to accept or invite international actors to participate in the conflict. However, there is a salient change in this attitude that takes place during the peace process with the Pastrana administration. During negotiations, the FARC was more systematically exposed to international actors and had the chance to learn more about the possibilities and the risks that the implementation of an internationalization strategy might eventually offer. This factor and a previous disposition to find international legitimacy through the international legal recognition of its status as a belligerent organization, transformed its posture vis-à-vis international actors and vis-à-vis the advantages of military and politically internationalizing.
REFERENCES


(Intelligence and official documents are not in this reference list yet. Some additional but minor footnotes have not been included yet)