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FARC Strategic Communications
& The Colombian Peace Process

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Understanding the strategic communications methods and objectives of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) requires an examination not only of the how, what, to whom and why of FARC communications, but also of the political context in which they are communicating. To understand its relative efficacy, one must also examine the Government of Colombia's (GOC) strategic communications strategy in the context of the Colombian Peace Process initiated in August 2012. This is particularly true as the process enters a potentially critical end-stage following the July 12, 2015 re-launch of the GOC-FARC dialogues.

Modern Methods: Retrograde Messages

In recent years, and particularly since the start of the Havana talks between the FARC and the GOC, the FARC has employed a variety of modern communication tools. The FARC, for example, has established several Twitter feeds, multiple websites with corresponding blogs, and has regularly released YouTube videos disseminating its messages.¹ Notably, many of these online tools appear in both Spanish and English, underscoring an expansion of the FARC's intended (if not actual) audience for its strategic communications.

These modern means of communication have supplemented, rather than supplanted more traditional means the FARC uses to communicate to key audiences – press communiqués, printed materials, and radio in Colombia.² FARC representatives in Havana have also employed press conferences and individual press interviews with Colombian and international media outlets to get out their message. Despite the modern trappings of its communications and the FARC's pronounced drift into criminality, the FARC's message has remained firmly grounded in mid-20th Century ideological rhetoric.

The retrograde nature of the FARC's communications is unsurprising given both the ideological trappings of the FARC General Secretariat and the decades-long relative isolation of its key members. That isolation and its effect on the world view of senior FARC leaders was, for example, evident in the materials released by the GOC after its successful targeting of General Secretariat member Luis Édgar Devia Silva, aka Raúl Reyes, in March 2008. The Reyes materials as analyzed by the International Institute for Strategic Studies evidence a detachment from Colombia's modern reality and underscore the inflated sense FARC leaders have of their organization and its place in Colombia, the region, and the world.³

The dated nature of the FARC's strategic communications highlight one of the central challenges that has faced and continues to face the GOC in its dialogues in Havana—updating the FARC to realities in Colombia and the world. One of the key remaining obstacles to a deal in Havana, for example, is the question of transitional justice,⁴ a dynamic made more challenging by relatively recent global developments, namely the 2002 Rome Treaty. The GOC's obligations under the Rome Treaty make a general, mutual amnesty as part of any GOC-FARC agreement impossible. Helping the FARC realize this requires, among other things, bringing the General Secretariat up to speed on key global developments shaping the negotiating space that have occurred far beyond the mountains, jungles and rural countryside of South America.

Audience & Objectives: Intention vs. Reality

FARC strategic communications are directed toward at least 4 key audiences:

- (1) FARC rank-and-file;
- (2) Populace in "FARC controlled areas;"
- (3) Colombia's elites; and

(4) The international community.

The methods, messages and objectives behind the FARC communications to each audience are, to a certain extent, tailored. The FARC leadership's ability to reach each audience and the effectiveness of their messages are also quite varied.

In the case of the rank and file, the FARC leadership in Havana appears to have at least two objectives in their communication, which is carried out by more traditional means of communication.

The first is to explain what is happening in Havana and attempt to demonstrate both that they have not capitulated and that they are advancing their agenda through discussions at the table. With each of the interim agreements, for example, the FARC has published booklets laying out the contents of the agreement and comparing the results to their initial proposal on the issue. The second is to exercise command and control over rank-and-file FARC members in Colombia and, as a corollary, to be perceived by the GOC to be exercising command and control over the largest number of FARC fighters possible.

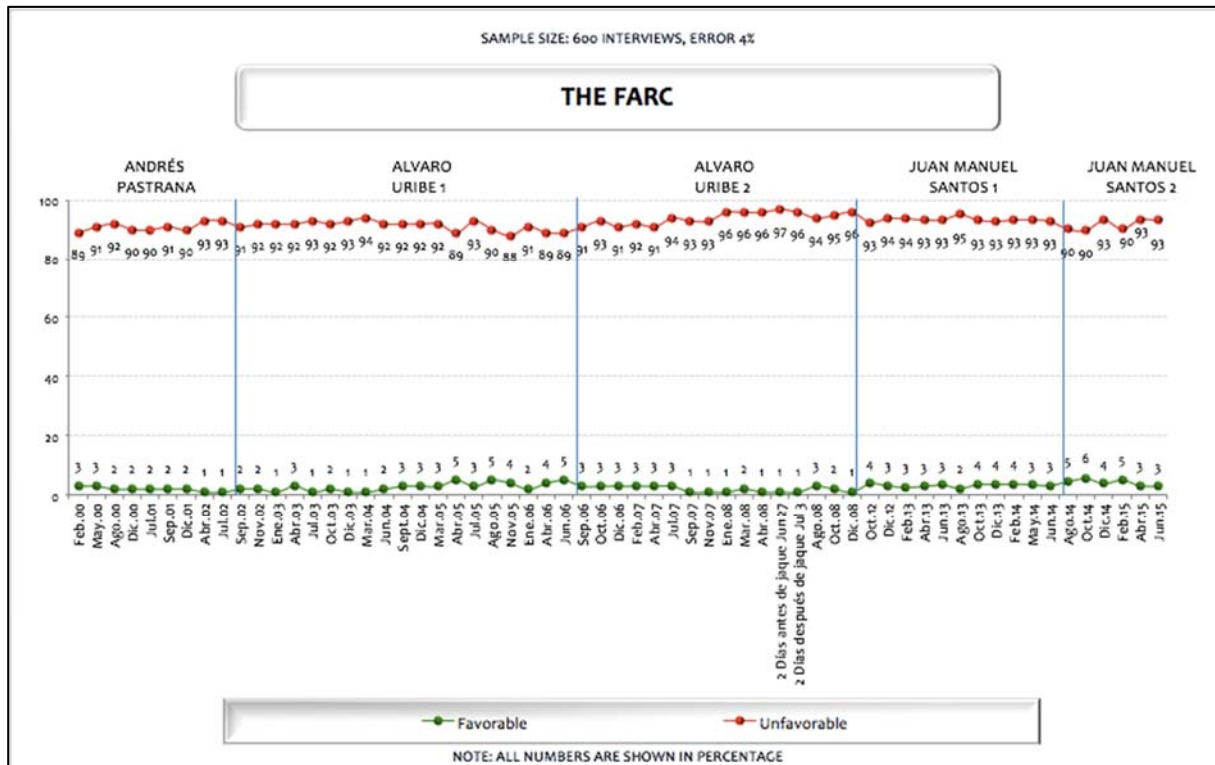
This command and control objective—both reality and perception—is logical in the context of attempting to shape the negotiating dynamic. This is particularly true given that one of the significant unknowns in the Colombian Peace Process is the extent of the FARC General Secretariat's effective control over rank-and-file FARC members and the implications thereof for demobilization if an agreement is reached. To maximize their negotiating leverage, it is clearly in the FARC negotiators' interest to foster the impression—whether real or not—that they exercise control over the largest number of FARC fighters possible.

The FARC's second key audience is the small percentage of the Colombian population that lives in areas where the FARC exercises some degree of control.^a The means and message utilized by the FARC to extend their strategic communications to these individuals overlap significantly with those related to rank-and-file FARC members as these individuals are often co-located and do not have ready access to modern modes of communication.

The key strategic communications objective with those living in areas where the FARC is most present is again to underscore that it is achieving important elements of its agenda in Havana and that it is standing up for those who have been victimized by the Colombian state and Colombian elites. This second message is coherent with a key overall FARC strategic communications goal in the context of the peace talks—to portray itself and its members as victims, not just victimizers, in Colombia's decades-long conflict.

The third key audience for FARC strategic communications efforts is the Colombian elite. An essential element of the elite, of course, is the GOC and its negotiating team in Havana, but the effort extends beyond the GOC to other key political and economic actors. With this last group in particular, however, the FARC's strategic communication efforts have been an abject failure, one where its history and contemporary actions overwhelm its tweets, communiqués, YouTube videos and the like.

It is beyond debate that there is no meaningful public support in Colombia, and certainly not among the bulk of its population that live in urban areas, for the FARC. Invaer/Gallup's time sequence regarding impressions of the FARC during the past 15 years underscores the negative image of the FARC as viewed by the populace of Colombia's 34 largest urban areas:



Other longitudinal studies of Colombian public opinion also show very low opinions of the FARC. Ipsos, for example, shows FARC approval holding in low single digits with one exception—11 percent in September 2012—in the past several years.⁵ Tellingly, in both the Gallup and Ipsos surveys there is no lasting improvement in FARC approval ratings at the commencement of or during the course of the current peace talks despite ramped up strategic communications efforts emanating from the FARC's negotiating team in Havana. Further, the FARC's actions in early 2015 in particular have significantly soured Colombian opinion toward the peace process as support for the process fell off from 72 percent in February 2015 to 54 percent in June 2015.⁶ Again, the FARC's actions appear to be drowning out any effort to win over Colombian public opinion.

The final target audience for the FARC's strategic communications efforts is the international community, and more particularly the United States. The most obvious sign of this international messaging effort is the FARC's resort to publishing its views on various Internet platforms in both Spanish and English.

The purpose of communicating in English is likely the misbegotten notion that there is an audience for the FARC's message in the United States and that that audience can somehow influence the United States Government's (USG) position on those end-of-conflict issues on which the United States has some degree of control. Primary among those issues appear to be securing a guarantee against extradition to the United States for senior FARC leaders and securing freedom for Juvenal Ovidio Ricardo Palmera, alias Simón Trinidad, currently serving a 60-year sentence in U.S. Federal custody.⁷

To the extent FARC senior leaders believes they can influence USG outcomes on these issues via media efforts, it simply underscores the detachment from reality endemic in their strategic communications efforts. There is no evidence that U.S. public opinion follows Colombia or that Americans think or care about who or what the FARC is and what it may want. Further, one would be hard pressed to find two dozen non-Colombia watchers in the United States who have heard of Simon Trinidad. To the extent these issues can be presented for action by the USG, it will have to be done directly by the GOC and likely only at the very end of the Havana talks. Even then, the USG response is far from certain and potentially restrained by broader practice and precedent.

In short, the FARC's strategic communications efforts have proven rather ineffectual and are likely to remain so unless it manages to modernize its message and, more importantly, radically alter its actions on the ground in Colombia.

Another Strategic Communications Failure: The GOC

The FARC, however, is not alone in its strategic communications failure in the context of the Colombian Peace Process as the GOC's strategic communication efforts leave much to be desired.

Since the public launch of the FARC peace process, President Santos and his team have, in many ways, over-invested in their peace message to the point that it is difficult to define what Santos stands for or advocates beyond achieving a peace agreement. That this is so, is particularly perplexing because Santos opened his presidency with a broader and effective reform program and message aimed at addressing the inequalities that have long haunted Colombia and that must be addressed whether or not a formal deal is reached with the FARC. In fact, although implementation of initial reforms has been uneven (speaking to the challenges of implementing any peace deal that might be reached and ratified by the Colombian people), the reform mantra is one that Santos could again embrace and is one for which history is likely to judge him well independent of what he does or does not achieve in Havana.

Efforts to build respect and confidence at the negotiating table with the FARC leadership have created a strategic communications challenge for the GOC, one that has only grown as the FARC through its deeds and words has failed to present itself as a defeated party. For example, despite delivering the most significant military blows to the FARC within Colombian territory with the successful 2010 and 2011 operations against Víctor Julio Suárez Rojas, aka Mono Jojoy, and Guillermo León Sáenz Vargas, aka Alfonso Cano, and thus

driving remaining General Secretariat members to the negotiating table, Santos is fighting a politically debilitating perception of weakness among the Colombian people.

In June 2015, for example, 35 percent of poll respondents thought the FARC could take power in Colombia through force, a level not seen since the waning days of President Andres Pastrana's administration in the wake of the collapse of peace talks with the FARC.⁸ That Colombian opinion equates the current state of affairs to a time when the FARC had nearly 20,000 soldiers under arms and had brought fighting to the doorstep of Colombia's major urban areas underscores that something is terribly amiss with the GOC's strategic messaging toward its populace.

The GOC's strategic communications efforts have, however, been more effective with regard to two other audiences: the international community and rank-and-file FARC members. In each instance the results are based on long-standing and sustained strategic communication efforts.

In the case of the international community, Colombia's image has improved in a sustained manner during the past decade. From 2001 to 2003, for example, Colombia's favorable rating in Gallup's measure of perceptions of countries among the U.S. populace ranged between 26 and 30 percent.⁹ By the end of the decade, Colombia had launched two strategic communications/branding campaigns – *Colombia es pasión* and *Colombia, el riesgo es que te quieras quedar* – that have been studied as model success stories by the World Tourism Organization.¹⁰ Three years later, *Time* celebrated President Santos and Colombia as they hosted the Summit of the Americas with a cover touting “The Colombian Comeback: From nearly failed state to emerging global player—in less than a decade.”¹¹

Among the most successful aspects of the GOC's sustained efforts to roll back the FARC during the past decade has been its communication efforts aimed at rank-and-file FARC members.¹² In the past 16 years, more than 40,000 FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN) fighters have voluntarily demobilized, in no small measure because of a combination of sustained military pressure and GOC communication campaigns to encourage fighters to abandon a lost cause.¹³

A Potentially Shared Strategic Communications Challenge

If an agreement is reached in Havana, the GOC and FARC will face a shared strategic communications challenge—convincing the Colombian people the deal is one worth accepting.

Although neither side has effectively communicated to date about the peace process, it is likely they will be able to find more communications success, at least in the short term, in a post-agreement environment. Santos's 2014 re-election campaign demonstrated that “peace versus more war” can be a winning electoral message in Colombia. It is quite conceivable that it could once again be a winning formula despite the current low-levels of approval of Santos (28%),^b the FARC (3%) and the process itself (54%).¹⁴ Whether a successful pro-agreement campaign can be waged will, of course, also depend in part on the substance of any deal reached in Havana and the actions of the FARC within Colombia as nothing could unravel support for a deal faster than continued violence by the FARC.

Endnotes

¹ See, e.g. <http://farc-epeace.org>; <http://resistencia-colombia.org/>; <https://www.youtube.com/user/FARC1Peace>; www.twitter.com/farc_colombia; https://twitter.com/farc_epeace; https://twitter.com/farc_epeace; <http://resistencia-colombia.org/index.php/farc-ep/revista-resistencia/bmc>.

² The FARC maintains various radio stations, known as the “Bolivarian Radio Network.” The Resistencia Colombia blog maintains links to some radio broadcasts, <http://resistencia-colombia.org/index.php/crb>.

³ IISS, “The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador, and the Secret Archive of ‘Raul Reyes’,” available at <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic%20dossiers/issues/the-farc-files--venezuela--ecuador-and-the-secret-archive-of---39-ra--250-l-reyes--39-8716>.

⁴ See, e.g., Chris Kraul, “Picking up the pace of peace talks between Colombia, rebels,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2015 available at <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-colombia-concession-rebels-20150713-story.html>.

⁵ Ipsos, “Colombia Opina Abril 2015,” available at <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/gran-encuesta-santos-esta-la-baja/426263-3>.

⁶ Invamer/Gallup, “#107 Colombia Junio 2015,” available at <http://colombiareports.com/santos-approval-rating-sinks-to-28-gallup/>.

⁷ See, e.g., “Updates from WOLA: The Extradition Issue,” March 20, 2015 available at <http://colombiapeace.org/2015/03/20/the-extradition-issue/>.

⁸ Invamer/Gallup, “#107 Colombia Junio 2015,” available at <http://colombiareports.com/santos-approval-rating-sinks-to-28-gallup/>.

⁹ Gallup, “Country Ratings: Favorability,” available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1624/perceptions-foreign-countries.aspx>.

¹⁰ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “Colombia: Back on the Map of World Tourism,” January 2009, available at <http://www2.unwto.org/agera/colombia-back-map-world-tourism>.

¹¹ Available at <http://content.time.com/time/covers/europe/0,16641,20120423,00.html>.

¹² See, e.g., John Otis, “Why Colombia’s Leftist Guerrillas Are Defecting,” Oct. 30, 2009 available at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1931814,00.html>.

¹³ Holger Alava, “Colombia’s demobilization campaign persuades FARC terrorists to surrender,” *Diálogo*, Oct. 27, 2014 available at http://dialogo-americas.com/en_GB/articles/rmisa/features/2014/10/27/feature-02.

¹⁴ Invamer/Gallup, “#107 Colombia Junio 2015,” available at <http://colombiareports.com/santos-approval-rating-sinks-to-28-gallup/>.

^a The percentage of the Colombian populace living under FARC control or influences has diminished markedly from its high point in the opening years of the 21st Century. The exact number, however, is hard to determine as not all illegal armed groups that control portions of Colombia’s territory operate under the banner of the FARC, nor has the GOC managed to exercise persistent control of conflict zones.

^b Although Santos’s approval rating is low, it is important to contextualize his standing as his approval rating was in the middle of the pack among South American Presidents in June 2015 according to roughly contemporaneous national polls as President Rousseff stood at 10 percent (Datafolha), President Humala at 16 percent (GfK), President Maduro at 25 percent (Datafolha), President Bachelet at 27 percent (GfK Adimark), President Fernández de Kirchner at 40 percent (M/F), President Correa at 46 percent (CEDATOS), and President Morales at 75 percent (Ipsos).