

# The National Liberation Army (ELN), Early 2020

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**T**he *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN) is one of the most prominent and virulent guerrilla force structures in northern South America. The ELN is in ascendance, but it should not be analyzed as though it were an independent entity. Instead, it should be considered as one of the armed units, on par with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC),

within the greater Bolivarian hierarchy. While the ELN's subunits and lesser associates exercise some autonomy of action, the ELN as a cohesive identity is subordinate strategically to the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Communist Party of Cuba, or PCC) and to the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, or PSUV). The PSUV, in any case, is a subordinate sister of the PCC, which is the apex geopolitical organization.<sup>1</sup>

Members of the Ernesto Che Guevara Front, belonging to the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN) guerrillas, shoot 26 May 2019 during a training exercise in the Chocó jungle, Colombia. The ELN is Colombia's last rebel army and one of the oldest guerrilla groups in Latin America. (Photo by Raul Arboleada, Agence France-Presse)





The ELN is currently the go-to Bolivarian assault force that has been and will increasingly be used to attack targets within Colombian territory. These attacks are part of a multiform war waged by the PCC and the PSUV to gain control over most of northern South America. The PCC has effectively consolidated strategic control over Venezuelan geography, at least in terms of international interference with that control. The principal theater of war is now Colombia. The Bolivarian military operational modus operandi appears to be to raid into Colombia with the ELN's light infantry forces while using the more highly capitalized forces (such as antiaircraft missile batteries) of Venezuela's *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* (Bolivarian Armed Forces, or FANB) to provide the ELN's withdrawing subunits sanctuary inside Venezuela. The intermediate geographic objective

of the military portion of the strategy is the lines of communication (smuggling routes) from and through Colombia.<sup>2</sup> Securing these lines against effective interference and interdiction assures a major stream of income and financial sustainability. An emerging tactical concern is the possible use of armed aerial drones by the FARC or ELN against targets inside Colombia.

## The Relationships

Members of the ELN recently celebrated the guerilla organization's fifty-fifth anniversary.<sup>3</sup> The Colombian army had all but wiped the ELN out in the 1970s; in 1978, the strength of the ELN



was said to be little more than thirty *compañeros* divided in two locations in Colombia.<sup>4</sup> It survived on a thread, however, and today is prospering as a dominant armed force in a region crisscrossed by an array of other iniquitous outlaw groups.<sup>5</sup> At its inception, the ELN was “implanted” into Colombia through Cuban effort as an extension of the Cuban revolution.<sup>6</sup> It does not appear that the link between the ELN and the Cuban communist revolutionary vanguard was lost. Today, the ELN headquarters is effectively in Havana.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Colombia’s other major communist guerrilla organization, the FARC, which entered into a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016, appears to have never really abandoned its military cadre or intentions.<sup>8</sup> In step with the ELN, the FARC now has a more clearly subordinate relationship to the Bolivarian hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, given the greater influence of the PCC and PSUV over senior leaders of the two Colombian groups, relations today between the FARC and the ELN subunits are marked less by confrontation and more by collaboration as sister units under the Bolivarian coordinating umbrella.<sup>10</sup>

A recent military intelligence report confirms that the processes of alliance between the FARC and the ELN have arrived at unheard of levels. ... At this time an agreement exists among members of the so called dissident groups of the FARC, or armed wing of the FARC, and the guerrilla of the ELN, in order to try and begin to hit politically and militarily, the Caquetá, Putumayo, and Guaviare regions.<sup>11</sup>

Theirs is not just an alliance but an alliance within a larger movement and common strategic project.<sup>12</sup>

General Navarro said, “There are more or less some 1,000 men in arms and terrorist support networks that are found in the border states of Venezuela with Colombia,” and also assured that, “the connivance and complicity

of the Venezuelan [National] Guard is total and absolute, and I’m not saying it, the inhabitants and authorities of the local zones are saying it, and this is totally confirmed.”<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between the ELN and regular formations of the Bolivarian armed forces of Venezuela is concordant.<sup>14</sup> In mid-2019, a major article was published in Colombia’s *Semana* magazine to this effect.<sup>15</sup> A follow-up interview published by the newspaper *El Tiempo* states the following:

*Interviewer María Isabel Rueda:*

General Navarro, although we all knew that Venezuela protected guerrillas of the FARC and ELN, this is the first time that we are presented documents with the proof, like what *Semana* magazine just did in its last issue. Do those orders surprise you, or are the nothing new for you?

*Colombian Armed Forces*

*Commander, General Luis*

*Fernando Navarro:* We ourselves, since the government of Hugo Chávez, have been familiar with this type of information. The Colombian guerrilla has considered Venezuela its rearguard area. But in this new stage, when the FARC is in the peace process with the Colombian State and is now demobilizing, turning in weapons, there remains a group of residuals that park themselves in Venezuela, where they begin an important growth and development while protected in that territory. [President Nicolás] Maduro said it in the framework of the Forum of Sao Paulo: “Welcome ‘Santrich’ and welcome ‘Márquez.’” But, obviously, they have been there since long ago. “Iván Márquez has hailed from Venezuela since the year 2004, 2005.”<sup>16</sup>

Like the FARC, the ELN for a long time has been given sanctuary in Venezuelan and Cuban territory by the Bolivarian parties. It seems now, however, that hushed impunity has evolved through occasioned







In 2017, National Liberation Army (ELN) leaders Pablo Beltrán, Antonio García, and Nicolás Rodríguez meet with demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) leader Timoleón Jiménez in Havana. (Photo by Juvenal Balán via Resolver, [www.resolver.se](http://www.resolver.se))

cooperation to open incorporation into the overall Bolivarian project.<sup>17</sup>

## The Physical Geography

The geographic prizes and physical centers of gravity of the region's organized armed competition are the systems of smuggling corridors, routes, and *trochas* (border-crossing alleys). Colombian export products vary over time, and their markets evolve, but the geography of the clandestine movement of things—smuggling—is generally more stable. The specific locations within that geography change somewhat in accordance with the intensity of violent competition for the routes and for the most valuable nodes thereon. While lesser criminal gangs may have to satisfy themselves with localized cultivation, extraction, processing, theft of valuables, or the direct action of kidnapping, the more dominant armed organizations can specialize as toll road operators and wholesalers. Heightened THC content marijuana is a recent example.<sup>18</sup> The genetically modified strain called “creepy marijuana” is a desirable hybrid that requires some technically sophisticated greenhouse cultivation, which means that the smuggling begins

at specific growth locations. A distinct or fixed route protection may be needed near the new sources, but routes through and out of the country for the new product will be the same as for heroin, cocaine, or any of a number of other established commodities. In relationship to these routes, the ELN logically benefits to the extent it maintains comparative advantages in mobility, firepower (in correlations of force on contact), extent of historical presence, leadership experience, and transnational alliances. It can afford to avoid upstream management problems of illicit activities (e.g., ecological damage of illegal mining activities), which facilitate legal impunity for some of its leaders, even while such impunity has become a national political issue.<sup>19</sup>

A measure of success regarding these smuggling routes is their relevant commodity flow. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, Colombia's export-quality cocaine production more than tripled between 2012 and 2017, and more than 90 percent of the supply of cocaine in the United States is of Colombian origin.<sup>20</sup>

While smuggling routes are a main prize, there is great value in controlling commodity source areas, as

that leads to territorial political control. Such territorial control is also harder to accomplish, especially where more locally knowledgeable and family-connected gangs contest control. InSight Crime, a non-profit journalism and investigative organization, has done considerable work monitoring lawlessness within Colombia, which has necessarily included an occasional focus on the ELN. A well-presented interactive map (see static version on page 91) on InSight Crime's Colombian Organized Crime Observatory webpage displays an estimate of the geographic extents within Colombia of the ELN, the FARC, "mafias," and coca cultivation concentration areas circa 2017.<sup>21</sup> The map suggests by geographic proximity that the ELN and FARC are for the most part separated according to who dominates what geographic territory within Colombia; the ELN is mostly in the north along the border with Venezuela, across the northern corridor and in the Pacific region, especially in the Chocó Department. (Colombian departments are similar to states.) It appears to have a growing influence in the southwest, including in the long-conflictive Cauca and Putumayo Departments.<sup>22</sup> However, the ELN is in a few places as the only outlaw force, especially in the Catatumbo border area in northeastern Colombia, where the ELN maintains valuable cocaine infrastructure.<sup>23</sup> According to Luis Alberto Acevedo, the secretary of government of Norte de Santander Department, "All the illegal groups converge here, all

of them are in opposition in the Catatumbo zone."<sup>24</sup> In the Pacific region, the ELN is facing mortal competition from the Gulf Clan, an organization that derives considerable strength from legacy parts of the dismantled *autodefensas*, a paramilitary drug trafficking group, birthed in that region decades ago.<sup>25</sup>

Also from InSight Crime, in an article by Juan Bautista Díaz, a map displays

in general terms the geographic presence of the ELN inside Venezuelan territory.<sup>26</sup> The ELN leaders, perhaps coaxed by their Bolivarian overlords, have not limited themselves to route rents and extortions, or "organizing" peasant farmers and artisanal miners.<sup>27</sup> Over the past couple of years, their role within the Bolivarian scheme has evidently expanded along with the geographic depth of their units' presence inside Venezuelan territory.<sup>28</sup> It appears they have also been used as organizational disciplinarians in some of the illicit extraction activities, a function that the Bolivarians perhaps feel unsuitable for regular units of the FANB.<sup>29</sup>

## The Kind of War

A 2002 anthology produced by American military scholars at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, titled *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot*, proffered the term "compound warfare," or "the simultaneous use of a regular or main force and an irregular or guerrilla force against an enemy."<sup>30</sup> The book makes a sweep of several historical cases from the Napoleonic War through Vietnam, then to the Russian experience in Afghanistan. The upshot is expressed clearly by Professor Robert Baumann: "A guerrilla campaign waged without the benefit of conventional support or geographical sanctuary can be defeated by a power possessing superior resources and sufficient resolve to use them."<sup>31</sup> The statement is surrounded by a tacit corollary that a geographical sanctuary, a rebalancing of resources, or insufficient resolve might upend the assertion. Professor Thomas Huber makes a more detailed description of the form as follows:

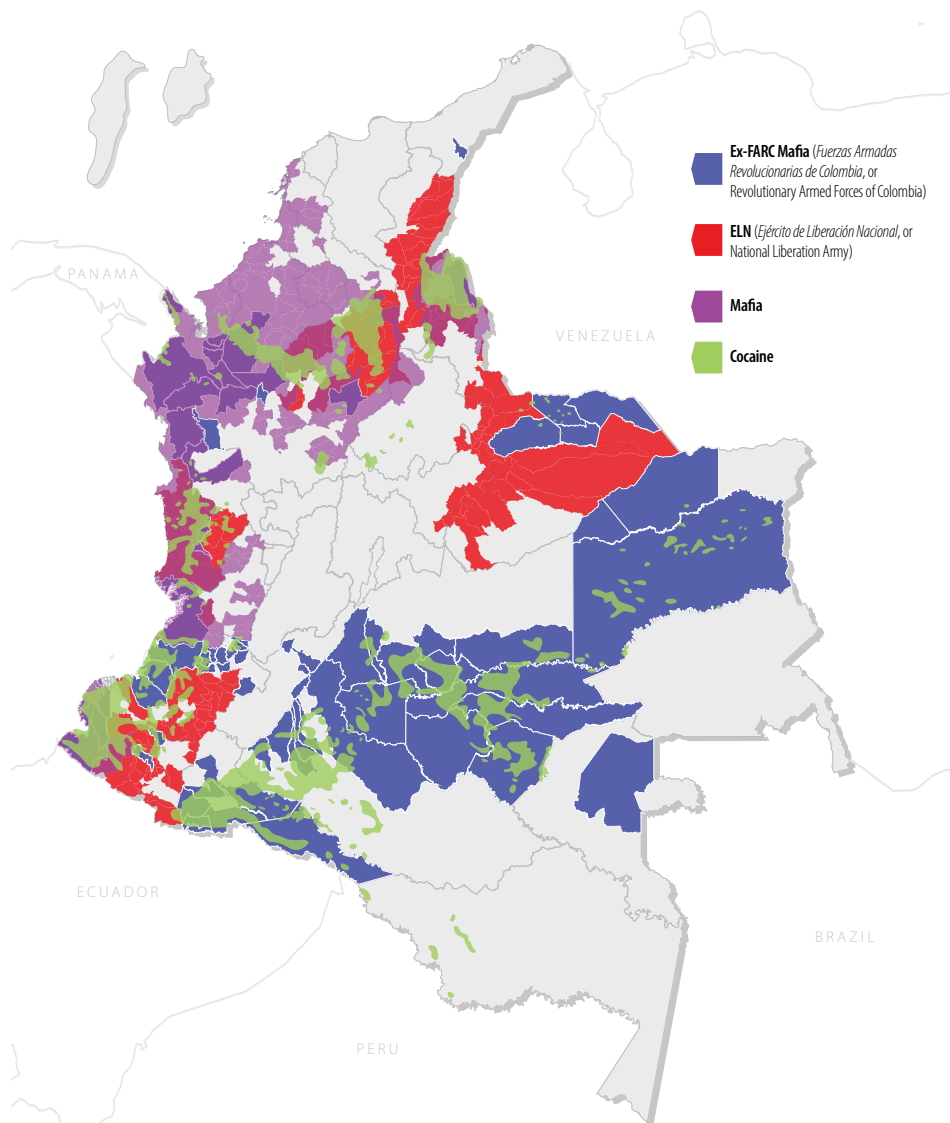
Historically, two conditions occurring together seem usually to guarantee main-force invulnerability: safe haven and a major-power ally. If the CW [compound warfare] operator has a safe haven where his regular force can shelter, and a major ally that is at least a peer of his major-power adversary, then in theory the CW operator can keep his regular force in being indefinitely. The main force can thus also protect and nourish the CW operator's guerrilla force in a similar fashion.

Almost always the major power adversary, faced with these simultaneous pressures indefinitely, sees his campaign to be futile

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or too costly and eventually abandons it. In other words, the adversary is defeated. Fortified compound warfare in its original formulation thus features four elements that sustain a minor power conducting an FCW [fortified compound warfare] defense: (1) a regular or main force, (2) an irregular or guerrilla force, (3) a safe haven for the regular force, and (4) a major-power ally. (The most advantageous position in an FCW situation is that of the major-power ally of the minor-power FCW operator. The major-power ally enjoys extravagant leverage on his strategic rival at little cost to himself.) Fortification makes the difference between compound warfare, which is difficult to defeat, and fortified compound warfare, which is nearly impossible to defeat.<sup>32</sup>

“Compound warfare” is a useful descriptor in addressing the Colombian military challenge, at least at the operational level along the border, in that it highlights the use of conventional units to shield guerrilla units from intervention by an adversary’s conventional units. That is to say, the PCC and the PSUV can deploy conventional units with sophisticated weaponry to provide a level of protection for ELN and FARC units from interdiction by



(Map courtesy of InSight Crime, Colombian Organized Crime Observatory, Universidad del Rosario, <https://insightcrime.org/indepth/observatory-rosario/>)

## Presence of Criminal Actors and Economies of Colombia, 2017

Colombian forces, especially aerial forces. The ELN makes raids into Colombian territory and then, as necessary, withdraws back across the border to enjoy the protection of Bolivarian air defense and other formations.<sup>33</sup> Still, the term compound warfare also might limit understanding in that, as in the case of the Bolivarian posture toward Colombia, the prosecutors of the war are not simply applying two dimensions—conventional and guerrilla—but an entire



array of means that support one another.

Eduardo Mackenzie is a scholar and journalist based in Paris. He is probably the world's foremost scholar on the history of the FARC and is perhaps the best informed, clearest thinking, and most prolific writer among those who address conflict in northern South America. A comment he published on 20 September 2019 was inspired by the drone attacks against the oil fields in Saudi Arabia of the month prior, as well as by the return-to-war announcement of FARC leaders at the beginning of the same month. Mackenzie notes that several top leaders of the FARC had announced from Venezuela that they "are ready to continue attacking Colombia by all methods in order to build a 'Bolivarian' regime. To do that, they say they are going to employ a 'new operational method' of armed struggle."<sup>34</sup> Mackenzie speculates the FARC leaders might only have been referring to the

installation of clandestine cells in all spheres of the Colombian State and of the society. It could be that (the pseudo party lead by aka Timochenko is the embryo of that



(Map courtesy of InSight Crime, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/colombia-venezuela-criminal-siamese-twins/>)

## Presence of Armed Groups on the Colombia-Venezuela Border

operation), and it could be something worse: a new type of war of attrition in which they will have a new type of weaponry at their disposition including armed drones and medium-range missiles.<sup>35</sup>

There is evidence that the FARC (at least) has been toying with drones.<sup>36</sup> Although the recent reportage suggests that the use of drones by the guerrillas is a new phenomenon, that assertion is not entirely correct; it is more of an evolved desire. In 2002, the FARC conducted an indirect fire attack on the inauguration of President Alvaro Uribe.<sup>37</sup> These were rockets and not drones, but radio-controlled model airplanes, one loaded with explosives, were later found in at least one guerrilla encampment.<sup>38</sup>

The war is best described as a multiform war, recognizing the combination of all means of struggle. To use “proxy war” suggests that somehow the ELN is a proxy of Venezuela’s Maduro regime or of the Cuban government, or perhaps Cubans or Venezuelans are proxies of China, Russia, or Iran. All of that may be true, but it is simultaneously misleading. Leaders of the Communist Party of Cuba have long dominated regional strategy in the long, irregular war. Various actors, including the PSUV and other political parties, the ELN, FARC, ex-regional governments, several international organizations, lesser drug cartels, local *colectivo* (paramilitary) gangs, and other organizational identities, each wields some power to influence the others. One could reasonably assert that several of these groups are proxies of other of the groups.

## Strategic Narrative

A key element of strategy in irregular war is control of the basic grammar (both vocabulary and organizational theory) for analysis and diplomacy. The Bolivarian apparatus employs what we might call grammatical camouflage, and it does so today on the back of years of preparation of the public narrative. It has never gone unnoticed.

Intimidation is a hallmark tactical *modus operandi* in lawless areas, and the ELN certainly exercises the form.<sup>39</sup> On the strategic scale as well, the ELN protection racket has a record of success. As I wrote in a 2002 *Military Review* article,

By 2001, Pastrana [then Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango] was pressing for a [zone similar to that granted to the FARC] for the smaller ELN. The area chosen lies along the middle reaches of the Magdalena River. Aside from dominating the most strategically important

line of communication in the country, the proposed zone includes a major coca crop concentration as well as oil industry infrastructure. The *Semana* interviewer questions Pastrana about ongoing negotiations with local residents who were opposed to the proposed accord. The interviewer asks, “And if there is no agreement, are you going to continue with the clearance zone in that area?” The frank answer is troublesome, its logic perhaps the first public expression, beyond reciting abstractions, of the president’s reasoning: “The country needs to understand that the ELN is prepared to make peace, but if it doesn’t happen, it is prepared to make war. And it has a great terrorist capability.” [“My only priority is not peace,” *Semana* interview with President Andres Pastrana, 26 February 2001] In a nutshell, a president is stating that his country must understand that if he does not give an armed outlaw group strategically important land the group will hurt the country. To avoid violent harm, the president advises the country that it must yield its wealth and accept strategic risk.<sup>40</sup>

How did Colombia arrive at a point where its president would make an unvarnished plea in favor of appeasement to a violent band? Part of the reason was the preparation of the logic of and justification for criminality. A few years prior, Professor Mauricio Rubio brilliantly and completely described the semantic deception in a book titled *Crime and Impunity*. Kidnapping was and is a scourge in Colombia. It is the basic protection racket and as fundamental a crime as murder and rape. Loved ones of the taken are told that for a fee, the captors will keep the hostage safe. It would seem there is no way to justify kidnapping, but in Colombia the communist left found a logical fallacy that could be effective when repeated enough. They would distinguish kidnapping from “retention” and give retention a political pass:

The practitioners of this activity [kidnapping] have suggested, in perfect concordance with the theories’ script, how to differentiate between kidnapping and “retention for economic ends” the fact that on



the first a personal interest is satisfied while the second responds to collective interests. There exists a difference between kidnapping and retention that is essential to specify: kidnapping is an act, criminal, conducted by common delinquency that has as its end the personal interest of whoever

struggle, not have a legal political party, and not enjoy impunity turned into immunity (as many FARC leaders currently enjoy as a result of their negotiation round). Leaders of the ELN are not likely to gain added impunity through negotiations with the Colombian government. Their sponsors for impunity are all the more likely to be Cuban and Venezuelan.

“Beating the ELN on the battlefield, tactically, means beating them as often as possible in contacts, but at the operational level, it has to mean cutting off their lines of communication.”

commits the infraction; retention is fundamentally a political act, whose ultimate purpose is determined by objectives of collective welfare, in the framework of an historic project of social transformation led by a revolutionary organization.<sup>41</sup>

This is where we find Colombia in its public discourse today as to all manner of crimes including environmental depredation, massacres, and drug trafficking. The far left has convinced enough people that in the name of what is essentially the Cuban revolution, all things are politically forgivable. In that narrative context, horrors in Colombian territory are given a pass but only if committed by a revolutionary organization.

In a June 2019 article titled “Crimes without Punishment,” Javier Ignacio Mayorca launches discussion from the deep corruption of the Venezuelan national oil company to the impunity enjoyed by illegal armed groups generally. His summary of the public’s consternation and complaint about this condition also defines the strategic challenge in a nutshell: “They get away with it.”<sup>42</sup>

In mid-August 2019, FARC leaders stated they were taking at least part of the FARC back to war.<sup>43</sup> For the ELN, this has evidently had the effect of more deeply burying the prospect of some sort of negotiation between the government of Colombia and its own leadership.<sup>44</sup> We would suppose that the ELN is not going to enjoy the same breadth in its forms of

## Prospects

For reasons of historical, geographical, and cultural reach, and due to an intense and complex relationship, Venezuela finds itself deeply involved in the Colombian internal conflict. Both countries are currently going through critical circumstances in their divergent systems, derived in the case of Colombia from the relapse of its armed conflict and of the fight against drug trafficking, and in the case of Venezuela in its collapse of governability, result of the uncompleted political-institutional transition and the rethinking of civil-military relations.<sup>45</sup>

The above comment, though vague, appears to be a reasonable description of conditions today, but it is from the 2003 book *The Colombian Conflict and Its Impact in the Andean Countries*. Accepting for argument that the scholar’s comment was accurate at the time, it seems that things have not changed much in a decade and a half. Still, the idea that there is a “collapse” of governability would not fit well. The Bolivarian regime is solidified, stable, and facing no viable threat. It may not be governing gently, generously, or competently, but as a state, it is not collapsing. Hopes of a civil-military crisis leading to a coup were probably formed in misrecognition of the effective difference between uniformed and nonuniformed leaders within the Bolivarian system. Also dubious is the idea that Colombia has an internal conflict in which Venezuela is interested. A more durable and useful description is that in 2003 (and in increasing

increments since), the conflict is transnational, with its lines of communication stretching across numerous countries in the circum-Caribbean. Bolivarian political organs now in control of national-level assets and structures inside Venezuela (led by the Communist Party of Cuba with the obedient aid of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela) have been prosecuting a war against or in defiance of the Colombian national government. The war in Colombia is as international as it is internal and has been for some time. The lines of communication lead to and from the points of engagement inside Colombia. The reason is not a puzzle: Colombia is the geographic and geopolitical objective.

As the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board opined recently,

It's doubtful there was ever a FARC commitment to peace. A better read is that the guerrillas took a deal that included amnesty and 10 unelected seats in Congress, but that they had no intention of giving up the lucrative cocaine business or their dream of bringing down Colombia's democracy.<sup>46</sup>

Even that blunt comment seems cloudy upon analysis of its assumptions. The FARC may indeed have been committed to peace but only peace as defined by them—a definition in which they are politically dominant. The ELN, meanwhile, has always been the more ideologically intransigent of the two, and it has been more connected to the PCC.

## Conclusion

The consequence for the future of regional geopolitics was matter-of-factly stated September 2019

by a leader of the Venezuelan opposition party Vente Venezuela: “The region is at risk that Maduro’s criminal State expands.”<sup>47</sup> That is the perspective of someone looking from inside Venezuela. From Colombia, the problem must be more daunting still. Beating the ELN on the battlefield, tactically, means beating them as often as possible in contacts, but at the operational level, it has to mean cutting off their lines of communication. At the strategic level, it means going to their headquarters and destroying the leadership there; that is, denying them sanctuary. Most of the ELN’s lines of communication lead into and through Venezuela. The ELN headquarter sanctuaries are in Venezuela and Cuba. Simply put, while Colombia can degrade the ELN, it cannot defeat the ELN (or for that matter the FARC) without confronting the whole enemy and without physically entering Venezuelan territory to do so. ■

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## Notes

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2. Manuel Reyes Beltrán, “El gobierno exige al ELN detener siembra de minas antipersonal en Bojayá” [The government demands the ELN stop sowing antipersonnel mines in Bojayá], Radio Santa Fé, 7 January 2020, accessed 25 June 2020 <http://>

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*Ejército de Liberación Nacional: La historia de los primeros tiempos (1958–1978)* [Elements of the political ideas of the ELN:] (Bogotá: Rodríguez Quito Editors, 2001), 87.

4. Medina Gallego, *Elementos para una historia de las ideas políticas del Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, 374; Alvaro Valencia Tovar et al., *Historia de las Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia, Ejército* [History of the Colombian armed forces, army], vol. III (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1993), 143; Alvaro Valencia Tovar, *Inseguridad y Violencia en Colombia* [Insecurity and Violence in Colombia] (Bogotá: Universidad Sergio Arboleda, 1997), 101–3; Corporación Observatorio para la Paz [Observatory corporation for peace], *Las Verdaderas Intenciones del ELN* [The true intentions of the ELN] (Bogotá: Intermedio Editores, 2001), 136, 258–60; Wikipedia, s.v. “Operación Anorí,” last updated 25 January 2020, 2114, accessed 9 March 2020, [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operaci3n\\_Anor3#cite\\_ref-news.google\\_1\\_1-0](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operaci3n_Anor3#cite_ref-news.google_1_1-0). “[In 1973,] the Army eliminated a column of 80 guerrillas, which at the time amounted to a third of the total of the combat force of the ELN. ... The ELN was left decimated after the defeat and could not reorganize itself until after 1983, under the command of ‘Priest Pérez.’”

5. Sebastiana Barráez, “Tensión en la frontera: paramilitares colombianos amenazaron a la Policía venezolana por amparar a la guerrilla” [Tension on the border: Colombian paramilitaries threaten the Venezuelan police for helping the guerrilla], Infobae, 9 July 2019, accessed 9 March 2020, <http://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/07/09/arde-la-frontera-paramilitares-colombianos-amenazaron-a-la-policia-venezolana-por-amparar-a-la-guerrilla/>.

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