

*María Fernanda NOBOA GONZÁLEZ*

*Dean Director of the School of Foresight of the Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales (Institute for Higher National Studies). Quito (Ecuador)*

*E-mail: maria.noboa@iaen.edu.ec*

### *A reversal of security relations. New scenarios of tension and trajectories: the case of the ELN*

#### **Abstract**

This article constitutes a reflection on the mutation of the tactical actions of the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia and its implications in neighboring countries and in regional dynamics. This discussion revolves around critical positions on security in order to go beyond the State-centric approach and propose the need for strategic and anticipatory balances to understand the exacerbation of tensions and new trajectories of this guerrilla for the next decade. Thus, this article constitutes a theoretical-critical and methodological reflection on security and prospects of a highly sensitive problem, especially on the Colombian-Ecuadorian and Colombian-Venezuelan border. It is committed to unveiling the new ideological and operational rationalities of the ELN, especially on the borders of Colombia and Venezuela.

Preliminary findings show that the regional literature has worked in a limited way on the relationship between security and prospects regarding the change in the operational position of the ELN. It concludes in the need to resize the gaze and propose new analytics that allow us to understand the problem more comprehensively.

#### **Keywords**

Critical security studies, border dynamics, critical prospective, criminal ecosystems.

#### **Cite this article:**

Noboa González, M.F. (2021). A reversal of security relations. New scenarios of tension and trajectories: the case of the ELN. *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, issue 18, pp. 453-482.



## Introduction

### Road to security dissent. The contribution of critical perspectives

The detonation of the car bomb at the General Santander Police School in Bogotá (17 January 2019) is not an isolated event in terms of the new rationalities of a long-standing guerrilla group such as the ELN. This has forced expert researchers and analysts to rethink new theoretical, methodological and analytical approaches to security. In fact, the change in the conception of this group's operational areas and the tactical manoeuvres adopted have revealed a mutation from its own ideological and interest bases. This, among other factors, can be evidenced by the fusion of the various illegal groups that operate along the porous borders, and what several authors consider to be the configuration of complex criminal ecosystems.

Given that so-called mainstream security studies, legitimised and almost carved in stone for several decades, have shown weaknesses and analytical limitations in understanding the new security scenarios of today's world, this article seeks to critically unveil the new security scenarios. The political-strategic management of states requires a framework of social, moral and political responsibility to protect populations from traditional and emerging threats, for which a study with new parameters that allow for the redefinition and tactical mutations of the National Liberation Army is an obligatory task. These redefinitions should be oriented towards the production of inputs of high strategic value, flexible and adaptable to VUCA scenarios<sup>1</sup>, in order to broaden and deepen the understanding of the new dynamics of regional security and therefore a systematic reflection of categories associated with security and human rights, such as: protection, continuous strategic anticipation, the construction of early warnings that contribute not only to the state as the sole actor responsible for security, but that guarantee the inclusion of new actors (interagency actions) that in one way or another are involved in the contexts of security management (public and private sector).

The entire foregoing reflection is linked to the need to propose new ways of understanding and designing actions that guarantee better governance in regional security, especially for Colombian-Ecuadorian border relations, without marginalising the component of social responsibility and ethical commitment. For this purpose, several of the postulates of the Welsh School academic Richard Wyn Jones<sup>2</sup> were taken as a reference, in order to demystify the state-centric influence of security that relies on the resolution of security issues through the use of military force. From a critical perspective, the authors propose a systemic understanding of international phenomena beyond the state-military perspective, involving new —non-state—actors and issues of global relevance that must be studied in depth when studying complex and dif-

---

<sup>1</sup> VUCA: Volatile, Uncertain, Changing and Ambiguous.

<sup>2</sup> Wyn, R. (1999). *Security, Strategy and Critical Theory*. Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Pp. 105.

fuse phenomena, which include domestic, intermestic, international, transnational, trans-regional and other factors.

With this aim in mind, this article takes a brief look at the hegemonic positions on security with their main assumptions and analytical categories, and then contrasts them, exploring the behaviour of the ELN in Colombian territory from a critical security perspective, with the intention of tracing its trajectories and incidences over the last few years and its multi-systemic implications.

### *Traditional security trajectories*

In order to adequately situate the case study of the ELN guerrilla group, it has been considered pertinent to start from the different paradigms, approaches and lines of thought that have coalesced around International Relations and Security Studies as an area of study<sup>3</sup> of their evolution around what from the mainstream were considered 'isms', schools of thought and/or research programmes. Thus, all traditional conceptions have been repeated in most analyses of Colombian conflictology in the region, and have prevented complex and poly metric case studies. From this consideration, starting from a macro-understanding that encompasses foundationalist theoretical positions and orthodox methods grouped around Security Studies, we seek to trace categories and analytical units that transcend the immobility of the hegemonic approaches. For this reason, and by means of what is known as an *iterative movement* of research<sup>4</sup>, this analytical exercise has been developed, relevant to the deepening of the case study. Without attempting to delve into the advent of intermediate approaches such as constructivist ones, the orientation of this article is based on some postulates seen as dissident or critical, escaping from onto-epistemic and methodological prisons to enter into new dynamics of research and academic production<sup>5</sup>.

Morgenthau, who is considered a seminal author of the realist movement, especially in his *Politics among Nations: the struggle for power and peace*, alludes to the fact that the rationality of statesmen and their actions in terms of national interest are based on the quest for power, on the basis of which heads of state think and act in terms of interest, a condition that is evident in the course of history<sup>6</sup>, and shows that realism is based on a Hobbesian view of man. Moreover, the so-called traditional paradigm,

---

3 In this regard, there is an unresolved debate as to whether Security Studies should be included as part of International Relations or International Studies with a broader and more encompassing vision.

4 Interactivity in security research refers to the movement of permanently contrasting empirical data with theoretical categories, not in a linear fashion but in what Edgar Morin recognises as cognitive recursion loops.

5 Booth, K. (2007)- *Theory of World Security*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

6 Morgenthau, H. (1993). *Politics Among Nations: the struggle for power and peace*. New York, Thompson, McGraw-Hill. Pp.25-26.

based on realist theory, qualifies conceptions of security in that: 1) nation-states, in a 'state-centred' system, are the key actors; 2) domestic politics can be clearly separated from foreign policy; 3) international politics is a struggle for power in an anarchic environment; 4) there are asymmetric gradations of nations' capabilities in a decentralised national system of states possessing legal equality or sovereignty<sup>7</sup>

Realism functionally conceives anarchy as an onto-epistemic form and position to explain International Relations<sup>8</sup>. Ultimately, anarchy is understood as the absence of an authority that motivates agreements or prevents the use of force. It is the nature of the international system that explains why states behave in such a way when seeking security in the international environment.

Moreover, for realists, anarchy produces self-help in the world. The power factor over states implies that the logic of self-help produces competition in the international system, which generates the security dilemma and at the same time problematises the possibilities for collective action<sup>9</sup> [author's translation]. In international studies, the security dilemma still helps to understand how states, despite not intending to attack each other militarily, the fragile context of mistrust, insecurity, fear, uncertainty—together with the central premise of no central political authority—is sufficient for war to find its way recurrently<sup>10</sup>. For example, the regular purchase of arms by the Colombian and Venezuelan armies<sup>11</sup> determined that both states will reinforce their borders in the event of a military conflict between 2014-2016. In this anarchic system, characterised by the absence of hegemonic stability, the international system would be susceptible to a Hobbesian war of 'everyone against everyone'<sup>12</sup> which makes realism a pessimistic approach to state action. In this sense, national interest and policies, as has already been emphasised, are framed in a struggle for the maintenance of power in which individuality and selfishness are at play. From this perspective, security becomes an instrument of protection against the external invasion of military force between states. Therefore, each state is responsible for strengthening its military capabilities to

7 In critical security studies, asymmetric gradations are the disparity between states' design and management of capabilities (which include various dimensions).

8 We have chosen to write International Relations when referring to the discipline; and international relations in lower case when referring to its application.

9 Agius, C. (2013). Social Constructivism. In Allan Collins (ed.). *Contemporary Security Studies*. London, Oxford University Press. Pp. 96.

10 Terradas, N. (2009). El dilema de la seguridad y su importancia para el estudio de las relaciones internacionales. *Letras Internacionales Magazine*. Universidad Ort Uruguay, 88(3), p. 1.

11 Since the implementation of Plan Colombia in 2000, Colombia has received USD 8 billion in aid from the United States for the fight against drug trafficking, while Venezuela has received USD 8 billion since Hugo Chávez came to power. Chávez in 1998 received military aid from China and Russia for deterrence purposes. Both states have had political-diplomatic frictions over their different perceptions of neighbourhood threat.

12 Ripley, B. (1993). Foreign Policy and International Relations Theory. *Political Psychology*, Vol 14, (3), p. 403.

protect its national security, which encompasses sovereignty, territory and population, all of which produce high perceptions of insecurity among states.

Under this consideration, the objective of security, for realism, is the identification of threats, vulnerabilities and risk factors that affect the inhabitants of a geographical space for which military forces would be in charge of preventive and/or dissuasive actions to avoid external attacks<sup>13</sup>. It is worth noting that realism was very popular during the Cold War, as it marks a key moment in which two superpowers competed for military and political power and geopolitical influence in various regions of the world. The United States and the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics became mutual threats to international security from 1949 to 1990. In fact, the realist school of International Relations has predominated in Security and War Studies since Thucydides' Peloponnesian War, including also Machiavelli's Prince, Sun Tzu's Art of War, and Clausewitz's War, which coincide on the themes of balance of power and hegemonic transition, which constitute core conceptual categories in realist studies.<sup>14</sup> These classical authors have been cited in order to understand the matrix from which the influence of Hobbesian philosophical postulates in the construction of the classical view of security is alluded to.

Although there are various theoretical interpretations of realism in explaining the international system and predictions, most authors agree that the core of the school is that the «key actors in world politics are sovereigns acting rationally to maintain their security, power and wealth in a conflictual international system where no supranational authority dominates to regulate conflicts or motivate peace agreements»<sup>15</sup>.

During the Cold War, most security studies were about states, strategies, military power and the *status quo*<sup>16</sup> as immutable concepts, which could not be questioned. In the traditional realist approach, all state actors are also concerned with maintaining the balance of power and associating themselves with the preponderant hegemony in their geographical space for 40 years as a survival strategy. During this period, the term *threat* was key to the legitimisation of national security doctrines insofar as the structural conception was homologated by the idea of 'absence of threat', i.e. the reduction of state actors interested in harming another state or 'the low probability of harm in order to reduce power'<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, strategic orientations are circumscribed to the games of power whereby the military marked the rationality.

---

13 Brauch, H. (2011). Concepts of Security Threats, Challenges, Vulnerabilities and Risks. In H.G. Brauch (ed.). *Coping with Global Environment Change, Disasters and Security*. Berlin, Springer. P. 61.

14 Levy, J. (1998). The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, (1), pp. 139-165.

15 *Ibidem*, pp.155.

16 *Ibidem*, pp.160-161

17 Baldwin, D. (1997). Security Studies and the End of the Cold War. *World Politics*, 48, (1), p. 117.

It is also recognised that this current understands security as prioritising militarism and the culture of the exercise of force to confront other state actors using violence. Moreover, realism marginalises the existence of 'other types of values by identifying threats at the economic (financial crises), environmental (earthquakes or river pollution) or political (crises in democratic models) level'<sup>18</sup>.

Likewise, as part of the realist approach, neorealism shows a greater focus on security issues, especially in the priority given to the management of war threats, which was quickly criticised, especially in its position on the management of the security system, the nuclear issue and, in particular, the issue of hegemony<sup>19</sup>.

In arguing the Colombian case from a realist perspective—which is the prevailing one in the literature—it can be inferred that the role of the state has been over-emphasised and that despite the agreement with the FARC-EP, neither the military forces nor other key security institutions have been able to effectively control or recover the integrity of the territory<sup>20</sup>. Although Alvaro Uribe's Security and Defence Policy (2004), Juan Manuel Santos' Comprehensive Security and Defence Policy for Prosperity (2011) and Iván Duque's Defence and Security Policy (2019) emphasise the strengthening of state institutions, especially in the areas of justice, social development and security, throughout the country, the militarisation of the most marginalised and vulnerable areas continues to be the main solution to any illegal activity. The border areas and certain rural sectors located in the Andes, Amazonia and on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts have weak state institutions and a lack of legitimacy in the conduct of political and developmental affairs, which means that guerrillas, illegal armed groups and criminal gangs operate, albeit clandestinely, with a certain degree of freedom. The reason for this is that the Colombian state has not been able to definitively establish concrete prospective strategic routes to replace illegal activities with legal ones at all border points with Ecuador. For example, projects to replace coca leaf crops in the area of Tumaco (Nariño) and Puerto Ospina (Putumayo) with coffee, potatoes, onions, cocoa and other products fail to compete with the domestic market. In addition, the different illegal groups co-opt the population to insert them into illegal businesses such as smuggling goods and building laboratories for processing cocaine paste<sup>21</sup>. Added to this is the dispute between armed groups to control various strategic geographic spaces or illegal routes in Colombia, which in some cases forces them to form alliances to redefine and mutate their tactical manoeuvres, in symbiotic

18 *Ibidem*, pp. 130.

19 Walt, S. (1998). The Renaissance of Security Studies. *International Studies Quarterly*. P. 30

20 During the end of Andres Pastrana's government, and the beginning of Alvaro Uribe's government in the first phase, even when mention was made of integrated action between various state actors and institutions, it was only during Alvaro Uribe's second administration that the construction of the inter-agency doctrine and the strengthening of state capacity linked to governance and state capacity were consolidated.

21 UNODC (2018). Report on Coca Crop Monitoring in Colombia. UN. P. 24.

alliances as in the case of the ELN, in order to guarantee better returns on their operations. On the other hand, there is no presence of justice for the resolution of legal or labour conflicts between citizens living in border areas, ‘justice or settling of scores by hired killers is quite common’<sup>22</sup>. Colombia has requested assistance from hegemonic countries—the United States and members of the European Union—to strengthen its force and intelligence capabilities; in fact, since the early 2000s the Colombian state has focused on regaining sovereignty through violence, reducing coca leaf cultivation and forcing the guerrillas to negotiate a peace agreement<sup>23</sup>.

What is happening between the Colombian state and the ELN from a realist point of view? According to data from the Ministry of Defence in Bogotá, the ELN in 2017 increased by almost 1,000 members to a group with more than 4,000 members - although according to military intelligence it may currently number 2,500 members<sup>24</sup>. Uribe and Santos militarised their response with different nuances in order to weaken the Marxist group on the battlefield and force them to negotiate at the negotiating table. Although in some areas of Colombia the ELN has the characteristics of an irregular army, its armed force is much more diffuse and dynamic, with a horizontal structure among its fronts, great autonomy among them, which has made several of its fronts operate to obtain their own resources and financing in the interior of Venezuela, with groups of drug traffickers in the Caribbean, and in the illegal extraction of natural resources in Chocó and near the border with Ecuador in Nariño.<sup>25</sup>

### *Liberal security trajectories*

While the liberal tradition can be understood from the historical period of the Enlightenment<sup>26</sup>, in grassroots thinking the liberal school of thought—with different approaches and nuances—was developed as a reaction to the hegemony of epistemic realism in International Relations and Security Studies. Liberal theorists argue that states live in an anarchic system and behave rationally selfishly; however, they defend the idea that it is not necessary to resort to war or violence to resolve conflicts between

22 Bolaños, E. (2019) El sicariato está acabando con la vida de los exguerrilleros. *El Espectador* newspaper. 23 June.

23 Vargas, A. (2018). La Fuerza Pública: una institución nacional. *Ola Política Magazine*, Opinion Section. 15 December.

24 For further reference, see: *Ministerio de Defensa – Colombia. Política de Defensa y Seguridad*. 2019.

25 Various authors (2020). *Fundación Ideas para la Paz. ¿Qué hacer con el ELN? Opciones ante una derrota militar lejana y un diálogo improbable. Notas estratégicas*. Bogotá. January, pp. 1-50.

26 Morgan, P. (2013). Liberalism. In Allan Collins (ed.). *Contemporary Security Studies*. New York, Oxford

University Press. Pp. 28-41.

states<sup>27</sup>. For liberals, it is possible to maintain cooperation between states to discuss and solve global problems. They consider nation-states to be relevant actors in the international system, but not the only ones; there are other key actors such as: international organisations, non-governmental organisations, transnational corporations, the media, civil society, which struggle to gain influence on various issues: the environment, respect for human rights, gender equity and equality, international trade, finance and democracy. For example, several NGOs in Bogotá such as *Fundación Ideas para la Paz* have published analytical publications for the UN, OAS, the European Union, Human Rights Watch and *Periodismo sin Fronteras* to monitor the disappearances of social and indigenous activists in various sectors of the country, as well as to motivate President Iván Duque to reopen the peace talks with the ELN and maintain the agreements with the FARC-EP. In 2019 alone, 118 leaders were assassinated in Colombia<sup>28</sup>, victims also include FARC-EP dissidents seeking peace<sup>29</sup>.

The behaviour of states is determined by domestic actors with power and influence in decision-making within the framework of their own political culture and not derived from the international system. In this context, foreign policy is domestic with an outward projection<sup>30</sup>, i.e. the fixation of the state's identity and its interests on the basis of which its dynamics within the international system are understood is essentialist.

Thus, while realism focuses on the struggle for power and security in an anarchic world, the liberal tradition looks to a benign international society where anarchy does not imply disorder and chaos. States may have conflicts of interest, but in seeking to maximise their economic wealth and maintain security, they are willing to create international institutions to regulate conflict and promote cooperation.<sup>31</sup> All these arguments constitute the main precepts of liberalism, on the basis of which man is considered free by nature. Liberalism focuses on the idea of cooperation for progress liberal political thought has succeeded in bringing a non-military discourse into the security studies debate. States continue to be the main object of reference, but the existence of other dimensions and/or spheres involving the individual, the human being, the citizen as a subject of rights, is also recognised. It is also committed to the possibility of achieving peace by seeking fair and supportive international orders that, through cooperation, can consolidate greater democracy abroad and, therefore, guarantee greater security among them.

In short, while realism «concentrates on explaining and predicting the behaviour of states in the international system, liberalism looks at the state as a unit but prioritises

---

27 Keohane, R. (1989). *International Institutions and State Power*. Boulder, Westview Press. Pp. 1-15.

28 See data from the report of the Ombudsman's Office in Colombia. January 2020.

29 For further reference, see *The Guardian* newspaper. Front Line Defenders, which describes it as the nation's most bloody region. *Semana* magazine, 20 August 2019.

30 Morgan, P. *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

31 Levy, J. *Op. cit.*, p. 159.

the analysis and study of the domestic subjects that are in charge of elaborating and discussing the issues on the foreign policy agenda, including security»<sup>32</sup>. It is argued that individuals involved in the decision-making process recognise states as part of international regimes that are «a body of values, principles, laws and rules for the prevention and resolution of conflicts»<sup>33</sup>, which further helps to make war or violence the last option in a scenario of clash of interests; consequently, cooperation cannot be difficult between states and, therefore, is optimistic in security matters, avoiding war by promoting trust between state and non-state actors.

This position is shared by Joseph Nye and Lynn-Jones<sup>34</sup> who warns against the risk of focusing Security Studies on the military; in fact, they consider that «it is necessary to widen the lenses of analysis to understand and comprehend international security; therefore, it is not necessary to fall into the militarisation of threats within states or at state borders»<sup>35</sup>. «There are many dangers or risks that can be solved with the support of civil society, political parties, international organisations, NGOs or think tanks. More non-state actors need to be included in decision-making processes to avoid deaths or human rights violations»<sup>36</sup>.

The end of the Cold War triggered discussion of new threats once the Iron Curtain ceased to be a problem for the West. In fact, it is considered that issues on the security agenda are no longer handled by the military in Latin America, but rather the topics have broadened to include economic, political, human rights and environmental issues<sup>37</sup>. At the same time, at the beginning of this millennium, a number of regional and hemispheric conferences were held with the participation of various international institutions to discuss the new role of the state in the protection of the individual and society in general<sup>38</sup>.

On the other hand, during the last decade, reflections on international security have involved local and provincial/departmental government authorities in order to understand the demands of the population, as in the case of Ecuador and Colombia in the face of the presence of coca leaf crops or criminal groups linked to drug trafficking, which has boosted the participation of various actors in the face of a problem. This is how the security agenda is being demilitarised<sup>39</sup>.

---

32 Williams, P. (2013). *Security Studies: an introduction*. New York, Routledge. P .4.

33 *Ibidem*, pp.6.

34 Nye, J. And Lynn-Jones, S. (1988). *International Security Studies: a report of a conference on the state and the field*. *International Security*, 12, (4), p. 8.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 12.

37 Rojas, F. (2012). *Seguridad Internacional, el espacio y posición de América Latina*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Teseo. P. 24.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 25.

39 García, B. (2018). Presencia de Carteles de la Droga en Ecuador. Interview on Vision Radio, Wednesday, 19 December.

Security liberals interpret a threat as «an action or sequence of events that is intended to do drastic harm and that affects the quality of life of the population of a State; or, that reduces the survival options available to a government, the private sector, the non-governmental sector (...) among others»<sup>40</sup>. There is also an interplay between freedom and security as «citizens agree to give up their freedom in exchange for more security and protection from the state»<sup>41</sup>. Former US President Barack Obama had already raised the issue in 2014 when discussions began on the surveillance<sup>42</sup> of US citizens by the National Security Agency (NSA) or the National Intelligence Agency (CIA) in order to prevent the Islamic State or Al Qaeda from carrying out terrorist attacks.

From a liberal perspective, Colombia is part of several international organisations committed to fighting human rights violations, drug trafficking and international terrorism. Each year, the Colombian government is accountable to the Organisation of American States (OAS), the United Nations (UN), the Andean Community of Nations (CAN) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) for its achievements in security issues, and policymakers are held accountable to the set of principles, laws, rules and norms that Bogotá has committed to respect. On the other hand, in Bogotá, with the participation of government authorities and civil society, threats have been defined through the drafting of Colombia's Security and Defence Policy.

Now that the talks with the ELN and the Colombian state have broken down under President Duque's government, the possibility of meeting again is becoming increasingly remote for many international organisations. It has been identified that there are two sectors within the Marxist guerrillas: a moderate line that is willing to continue talks with state and international actors; and another, more hardline sector that continues to bet on the armed struggle, which has gained strength. The role with third actors such as Venezuela and Cuba has been weakened by the constant confrontations between Bogotá and Caracas. At present, there are reportedly no channels of communication between the two capitals due to mistrust at diplomatic, military and political levels<sup>43</sup>. International organisations are committed to a solution that involves various civil society actors: academia, the media, regional and local leaders, but their offers are very distant due to the high level of violence in various departments with social movements such as Nariño, Putumayo, Huila, Caquetá, Cauca, among others.

The UN has insisted in several communiqués that the paths towards dialogue, confidence-building measures that contribute to the de-escalation of the armed con-

40 Ullman, R. (2011). Redefining Security. In Christopher Hughes and Yew Ming Lai (eds.). *Security Studies: a reader*. New York, Routledge. P. 17.

41 *Ibidem*, p. 14.

42 This would consist of spying on e-mails, social media accounts, telephone lines of any citizen for national security reasons. The issue was also raised by Snowden in the documentary 'Citizen Four'. Snowden is a former NSA and CIA official.

43 *Fundación Ideas para la Paz. Op. cit.*, pp. 1-50.

frontation and much less the «negotiating» offers between the two actors should not be closed<sup>44</sup>. The multilateral body insists that the possibility of dialogue must be preserved, but for the moment it is a dream. Other actors involved in a peaceful solution between the ELN and the Colombian state are the Catholic Church (Vatican), the governments of Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Italy, Sweden and the International Committee of the Red Cross, who have been insisting since 2019 on resuming the Havana talks. In addition, through communiqués both the UN and the Vatican have called on President Duque to stop declaring Cuba a «country that harbours terrorists».<sup>45</sup>

### *Constructivist security trajectories*

Constructivist security thinking derives from the School of Critical Security Studies which originated in 1989 in England and Denmark in order to question the classical premises of realism and liberalism that explain why states behave the way they do in the international system. Constructivism considers security in a subjective way, i.e. «it is interested in explaining how perceptions of fears, threats, vulnerabilities and risks are constructed among state and non-state actors»<sup>46</sup>; it also refers to the construction of subjective and intersubjective values regarding certain international phenomena; these values are inscribed in the culture and interests of those who construct the sense of security and insecurity<sup>47</sup>. Thus, the meaning of security is socially constructed<sup>48</sup>.

Constructivism contributes to security because it focuses on the relational dimensions<sup>49</sup> that give rise to interactions between actors—sharing values, interests, commitments—that result in the construction of identities in the face of conflict resolution or prevention in the international sphere. In this sense, by studying identities it is possible to identify the position of actors or predict their behaviour<sup>50</sup>. Thus: «A gun in the hands of a friend has a different meaning than a gun in the hands of an enemy»<sup>51</sup>.

---

44 International Crisis Group. *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South* (2019). Latin America Report No. 73. 24. August, p. 7.

45 See, *El Comercio* newspaper (2019). ELN apela a la ONU y al Vaticano para reanudar diálogo con el gobierno de Colombia. 3 July.

46 Brauch, H. *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

47 *Ibidem*, p. 64.

48 Wendt, A. (1994). Anarchy is What States Make of it: the social construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, vol 46, (2), p. 394.

49 Agius, C. *Op. cit.*, p. 97.

50 *Ibidem*, p. 98.

51 Wendt, A. *Op. cit.*, p. 394.

Emphasising the issue of identity, for example, White House decision-makers are concerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons and reactors in Iran, leading to heightened insecurity in the Middle East and Central Asia, but not Israel and India, which also produce nuclear energy. In the second case, the two countries are strategic allies of Washington as a result of security cooperation and mutual trust agreements; while Tehran is not so close to Western principles<sup>52</sup>.

On the other hand, recognised experts close to the various critical perspectives have put forward new concepts to redefine security in an evolutionary and adaptive way to the new realities of the world. It is believed that the hegemonic understanding of security proposed by realism «is rather narrow and limited because it is based on the Cold War context».<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, «third world countries must not reproduce the dominant thinking provided by Eurocentrism in the face of conflicts (...) it is necessary to create new doctrines and studies that break with the traditional vision of National Security»<sup>54</sup>.

Finally, they insist on situating security phenomena in local and regional coordinates, without restricting themselves to the view of the so-called international system. «Many of the problems have to do with ethnic, cultural or even religious conflicts; therefore, there is no need for military intervention»<sup>55</sup>; the West's approach to conflict resolution in Africa, Central Asia and Southeast Asia has undoubtedly been to use military force.

From a constructivist perspective, the mutation of the ELN's tactical actions is centred on understanding how the interactions between the actors (government agencies) have managed to classify the FARC-EP and ELN guerrillas as terrorists. On the other hand, it is worth analysing the agreement between the state and various sectors of civil society, such as businesses, think tanks, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and the church, on the urgent need to combat coca leaf cultivation, confront criminal groups linked to drug trafficking and reach a peace agreement. However, a version of repression and human rights violations has been constructed in public discourse as one of the strategies applied in the administrations of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018)<sup>56</sup>. However, the analysis of these strategies requires a broader vision that allows us to understand how actions have been taken to reduce the areas of influence of armed groups in border departments. However, it is undeniable that there are tensions regarding the construction of a national

<sup>52</sup> Williams, P. *Op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>53</sup> Acharya, A. *The Third World and Security Studies*. In Christopher Hughes and Yew Ming Lai (eds.). *Security Studies: a reader*. New York, Routledge. P. 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1-10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.16.

<sup>56</sup> This statement corresponds to the review of various media and policy papers from various foundations working on the issue such as: FESCOL and Konrad-Adenauer.

consensus to find peace in a conflict of the nature of the Colombian conflict, given the existence of a crossed framework of perceptions legitimised by official communication channels and digital channels.

According to data analysed by the Colombian Ministry of Defence<sup>57</sup>, the ELN guerrillas have stopped obtaining financing through drug trafficking and kidnapping (extortion), and extortion (in the oil sector). Today, they have reportedly diversified their sources into smuggling, illegal mining and money laundering. Regional experts indicate that at the beginning of the current millennium, the ELN was located in sectors close to the construction of the oil pipeline that crosses the departments of Arauca, Sucre, Boyacá, Santander and Bolívar towards the Atlantic coast; also, with the trans-Andean pipeline between Orito (Putumayo) and Tumaco (Nariño), and finally along the route of the pipeline in Antioquia with the aim of kidnapping several officials of national and transnational oil companies. On the other hand, according to the Early Warning System of the Ombudsman's Office in Colombia, both the ELN and the Gulf Clan<sup>58</sup> charge taxes for the entry of gold mining machinery in different regions of the country, and «demand 5% of the daily gold production from the miners, and in others, impose a charge for each illegal mine in use»<sup>59</sup>.

Drug trafficking would be profitable in the Caribbean area, particularly in the department of Bolívar, which went from having 1,000 hectares of coca leaf in 2015 to more than 8,000 in 2018, a period that coincides with the recovery of the guerrillas. Finally, another profitable activity would be on the border with Venezuela with the smuggling of gasoline and a long list of goods such as auto parts, food and foreign currency<sup>60</sup>. There is evidence of a mutability of ELN actions with regional mafias and dissident groups of the FARC-EP and paramilitary groups<sup>61</sup>.

Despite these changes in the ELN's actions, there are currently splits and internal tensions between a military and a more political line<sup>62</sup> over how to move forward in a new process of negotiation and dialogue with the government of Iván Duque. The political or soft line would be willing to surrender weapons in order to advance the peace process. Both sides are part of the Central Command (COCE) and the National Directorate, where the most moderate and open to peace sector is made up of «Pablo

---

57 All data and statistics appear in Colombia's various defence plans and policies.

58 Both groups are rivals and are fighting for power in Colombia's coffee-growing region.

59 Ombudsman's office (2017). *Grupos armados ilegales y nuevos escenarios de riesgo en el posacuerdo*. Bogotá. P. 4.

60 See *El Tiempo de Colombia* newspaper. Pablito y Venezuela, los dos dilemas del ELN. [www.eltiempo.com](http://www.eltiempo.com)

61 For more information, see RCN Radio (2019). Denuncian alianza criminal entre ELN y disidencias en frontera con Venezuela. 10 January. [www.rcn-radio.com](http://www.rcn-radio.com) (margins).

62 *Fundación Ideas para la Paz*. *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-54.

Beltrán and Gabino», who have differences with the Atlantic and South-western fronts in laying down their arms.

Not all of the ELN leadership was in favour of the decision of the car bomb in Bogotá at the beginning of 2019 that killed 22 cadets and injured 80, and even less so with the armed strike of 14 February (2020) that threatened to attack strategic sectors of the country such as the electricity infrastructure and the heavy crude oil pipeline. The guerrillas, despite their internal division, would have a presence in 10% of the territory, and in 112 municipalities<sup>63</sup>. On a daily basis, it struggles to withdraw into sectors formerly controlled by the FARC-EP, while at the same time confronting the Colombian state military forces, criminal groups, paramilitary groups and dissident groups. While this is happening, the Duque government's strategy continues to be armed confrontation and not to give in to dialogue as long as he is president<sup>64</sup>.

### The transition from strategic to security-critical studies

Having briefly surveyed realism, liberalism and constructivism, and their views on the concept of security, it is now time to examine the debate on the nature of the field of Security Studies. Although seen as a branch or sub-discipline of International Relations<sup>65</sup>, security studies remains at the heart of the discipline<sup>66</sup>. Due to its dynamism and importance in world politics, there have been several contributions to Security Studies since the end of the Cold War<sup>67</sup>.

Since the 1990s, an effervescence of positions has emerged to explain the position and decision making of state and non-state actors in the international order, as well as to question the state-centric perspective and its military arm in conflict resolution<sup>68</sup>. Critical perspectives have contributed to a re-imagining of the ontology of security and the issues to be explored or understood within Security Studies. Well-known critical scholars such as Wyn Jones (1999), Cha (2000) and Booth (2005) argue that security studies in the new millennium should not only focus on war, but also on the resolution of conflicts by non-state actors, and how they strive for peace. They insist

63 See *El Tiempo* newspaper (2020). Paro armado del ELN amenaza a Colombia. 14 February.

64 *Fundación Ideas para la Paz. Op. cit.*, p. 27.

65 Wyn, R. *Op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

66 Booth, K. (2005). *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*. London, Lynne Rienner Publishers. P. 261.

67 Cha, V.D. (2000). Globalization and the Study of International Security. *Journal of Peace Research*, 37, (1). Pp. 393-394.

68 Wyn, R. *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

on determining the conceptualisation of security studies aimed particularly at defining «the object or subject to be protected or securitised»<sup>69</sup>.

As has been insisted, security studies focused on the issues of war, its causes and implications; likewise, attention was concentrated on the high politics of the State oriented towards the «design of defensive and dissuasive strategies against an adversary or enemy»<sup>70</sup>; in short, «they concentrated on conceptualising threats from a military vision for the integrity of the territory and the protection of the sovereignty of a geographic space»<sup>71</sup>.

From the above, security studies for the Anglo-Saxon mainstream<sup>72</sup> became strategic studies<sup>73</sup> «to explain military relations between states, to identify hegemonic actors, to explain power relations in the international system which justified state-centrism in security studies»<sup>74</sup>. Despite the continued existence of strategic studies in educational institutions, security questions and criticisms have increased. Several critical security experts agree that once one looks critically at the referent object of security, it is essential to question its nature and scope; thus the state is not the only actor that should be in charge of security, but also non-state actors have the ability to «voice, question and create policies linked to a more humane and less repressive security». <sup>75</sup> Therefore, transcending the military perspective necessarily involves other security actors such as populations and societies in a broader agenda of issues (environment, transnational crime, converging threats, poverty and development, trade, use of light weapons, weapons of mass destruction, among others). The critical perspective also advocates demilitarising solutions to migration, the environment and crimes related to drug trafficking, incorporating the principles of inter-agencyism into security management.

In addition, various critical perspectives have been consolidated through the construction of conceptual innovations that highlight problems linked to security, such as the increase in deaths, illnesses, poverty and oppression of millions of human beings<sup>76</sup>. The idea of *emancipation* as a seminal concept has served to transcend the outmoded paradigms that led humanity to violent events based on race, gender or class. Indeed, emancipation invites theorists and students of critical security studies to «question

---

69 Collins, A. (2013). *Contemporary Security Studies*. London, Oxford University Press. P. 37.

70 Wyn, R. *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

71 *Ibidem*, p. 111.

72 This involves the US and UK working more on theory and doctrine to strengthen military capabilities, and training decision-makers for war. Wyn (1999).

73 There are many tensions in the academic debate as to when strategic studies became an autonomous discipline.

74 Wyn. *Op. cit.*, pp. 111

75 Booth, K. *Op. cit.*, p. 265.

76 Booth, K. *Op. cit.*, p. 266.

theories and practices that have shaped political life, all in order to safeguard human life»<sup>77</sup>.

Emancipation is conceived as an instrument to judge the continuity of classical security paradigms and to invite the scientific community to generate knowledge in favour of the individual, the collective and the coexistence of global citizens<sup>78</sup>; in short, «security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Emancipation, without power and violence, produces real security»<sup>79</sup>.

### **Prolegomena to a new security challenge. The mutation of the National Liberation Army's tactical actions**

Based on the above, and once the theoretical and methodological narrowness of the realist vision<sup>80</sup> of security studies has been identified, this article takes a critical approach to unveil the dynamics and rationalities of non-state actors that threaten regional security, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN). This guerrilla organisation, acting alone along the borders of Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela over the last decade, has grown stronger in a tangled web of terrorism, criminal gangs, drug trafficking and transnational organised crime. This particularity has catapulted it as a striking object of study for academics and researchers in the region. In fact, security literature is gradually shifting towards more systemic and complex analyses that question the referent object of security from more heterodox perspectives and propose security governance mechanisms that go beyond the military component. This novel approach seeks to explore in depth the relational dynamics, the impact of contexts, the historical-cultural, political and ideological determinants, and the discursive logics of legitimisation that have influenced ELN's trajectories and projections.

For all these reasons, understanding the ELN's tactical mutation in the context of the Colombian state's conflict requires it to be considered as a non-state actor that, transcending borders, is threatening the entire region. Moreover, their current tactical actions must be properly assessed by continuous anticipation of their possibilities, projections and scenarios on the borders with Venezuela and Ecuador insofar as several experts<sup>81</sup> consider the ELN to have particularities that are not common to criminal gangs or so-called dissidents of the FARC-EP. This is an exercise that demands redefinitions in the writing of the threat, investigating its construction and semantic representation, which were basically configured by the Colombian state and have been

77 Booth, K. *Op. cit.*, p. 266.

78 Booth, K. *Op. cit.*, p. 267.

79 Wyn, R. *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

80 The relevant concepts and positions of such a current have been located.

81 See the writings of journalist Andrés Molano (+), and Gustavo Duncan.

impregnated in the regional imaginary. In this sense, the analytical dimension would encompass notions of power, identity and doctrine-discourse of legitimation.

For this reason, this study also alludes to the postulates of Guillermina Baena's (2015) critical and humanist perspective on prospective,<sup>82</sup> which are synergistic with those of critical security analysed above. It is therefore a matter of creating convergence between the two academic approaches «beyond the margin»<sup>83</sup> by placing power at the centre of the debate as the seminal concept from which the orientation of security and a particular form of threat writing derive. In short, to define the ELN's power structure, which is functional to its identity vis-à-vis itself, the state and others, in the midst of a culture of conflict and specific criminality. Likewise, the intention of this work was to reveal the expected behaviour of such a threat in terms of specific trends and scope in the medium and long term, with the capacity of these actors to influence their own future course and that of the rest of the actors in Colombian and border society.

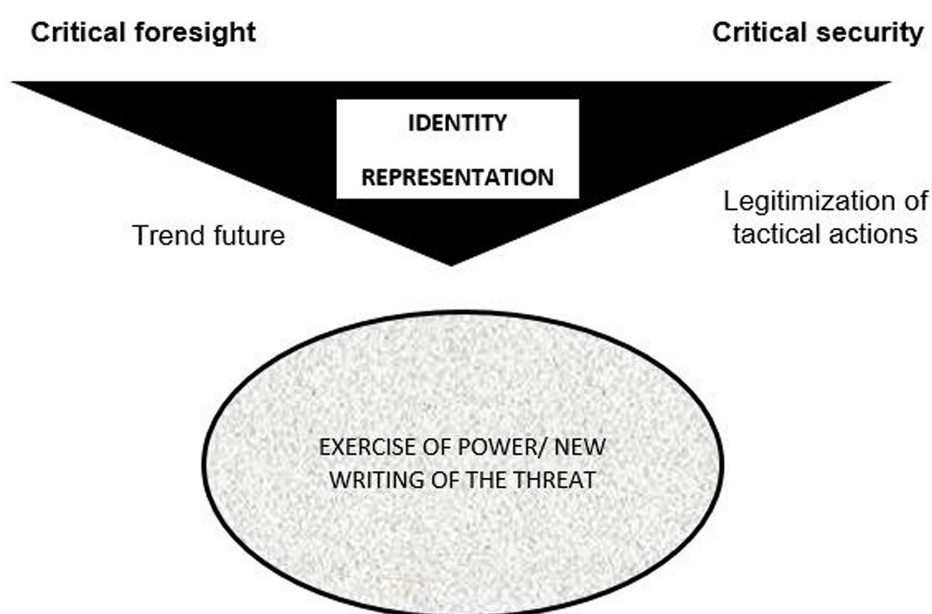


Figure 1. Disciplinary and conceptual triangulation. Source: prepared by the author

In this way, the triangulation of the sense of power framed in the postulates of prospective and critical security allows us to unveil the identity and doctrinal legitimation in the midst of the representation that the ELN has constructed for itself, the Colombian state and the region, over a timeline of almost six decades. These elements,

82 See Baena, G. (coord.) (2015). *Planeación prospectiva estratégica. Teorías, metodologías y buenas prácticas en América Latina*.

83 It alludes to the instrumentalisation of concepts and analytical lines that transcend rationalism. The debate on foresight as a discipline is an unfinished discussion; they accuse foresight of not having an object of study, insofar as the future does not exist and therefore they do not consider it to be scientific.

taken together, constitute future-bearing facts, which, even with asymmetries and discontinuities, have achieved the sustainability of the guerrilla organisation.

Precisely, the ELN's persistence in its operations and areas of influence, although as a guerrilla group it was always in the shadow of the FARC-EP, shows its resilience.



Map 1. Current ELN presence in Colombia. Source: Telesurtv.net 2016

Although it is not the purpose of this study to make a historical cartography of the ELN since its creation (1964) under the tutelage of the priest Camilo Torres, special emphasis is placed on tracing some lines and factors that indicate its rationality and its forms of action, including as a basis an X-ray of the exercise of its violence. «The emergence of these guerrillas was framed by the global conflict that arose after the Second World War (1949) between a liberal West and a socialist East and encouraged by the impact of the triumph of the 1959 Cuban Revolution»<sup>84</sup>. Some scholars have called it the first *revolutionary wave*, which involved the recurrence of violence, disruption and extreme dysfunctionality in the dynamics of institutional response. This has undermined civil society's credibility in the actions of the Colombian state in its capacity for governance and governability<sup>85</sup>. This deficit has had multiple implications in different dimensions—social, security and political—particularly on the borders,

84 Ramírez, J.G. (2015). Política y guerra sin compasión. In *Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia*, by Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas. Bogotá, Ediciones desde abajo. Pp. 471-518.

85 This should be added to the actions of FARC-EP, other guerrillas and criminal and illegal groups.

where a «vicious circle of violence» has been installed<sup>86</sup>, a space conducive to convergence between groups linked to transnational organised crime and terrorism and the emergence of the most unsuspected forms of action<sup>87</sup>.

From its inception, the ELN had at its base groups from the Catholic Church—and liberation theology— social groups and university students sympathetic to revolutionary rhetoric with the support of intellectuals. Several experts investigating the spirit of the ELN derive it from an insurrectional focus generated in Cuba that transferred the struggle to Colombia, derived from the enthusiasm generated by the study of the Cuban revolutionary process, especially the figure of Ernesto «Ché» Guevera. This orientation was nuanced by the position of radical Catholics and intellectuals at the beginning - later others joined in, such as the brothers Fabio and Manuel Vásquez Castaño as founding members.

This movement has gravitated its actions in the midst of ruptures and discontinuities with a strong presence in the Province of Santander; it was consolidated through recruitment in various modalities, prioritising priests of the Catholic Church. They reached nearly 200 members in less than 10 years; these members were eliminated by a military offensive by President Misael Pastrana Borrero of Colombia's conservative wing<sup>88</sup>.

After the near elimination of the group, the new leadership was taken over by Manuel Pérez and Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, alias «Gabino», who continued to direct the group's tactical actions, with the same nuances as those with which they began their activities: i.e. ideological reasons, kidnapping in planes, boats and vehicles, extortion, bank robberies and assassinations of members of the Armed Forces, located in the Santander area, operating in rural areas, especially around the areas of critical infrastructure of the Colombian state. Their tactical actions were widely deployed, especially in oil areas, where apart from kidnapping, they had become expert extortionists of oil company employees, avoiding drug trafficking and concentrating on political targets. However, in the 1990s, the ELN already entered the drug business, gaining prominence. They started taxing coca and becoming marijuana growers, operating actively in the province of Bolívar; within this new dynamic the ELN achieved a membership of 5,000 and more than 10,000 sympathisers. It should be noted that after this peak, the number of recruits increased and its position as the second most important guerrilla group in Colombia increased<sup>89</sup>.

---

86 Torrijos, V. (2015). Cartografía del conflicto. Pautas interpretativas sobre la evolución del conflicto irregular colombiano. In *Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia*, by Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas. Ediciones desde abajo. Pp. 679-728.

87 Farah, D. (2016). Convergence in Criminalized States. The New Paradigm. In Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic. *Beyond Convergence. World Without Order*. Washington D.C., Center for Complex Operations, Institute for National Strategic Studies. Pp. 179-233.

88 Stanford University (2015). Mapping Militant Organization. *National Liberation Army*. Pp. 1-18.

89 The literature emphasises the group's capacity for resistance, based on its ideological strength and ability to legitimise revolutionary discourses that made the web of its illicit economic activities invisible.

It should be stressed that its evolution was not regular from the outset. By 2000, it was legitimising itself in the face of the various illegal groups operating in Colombia with a highly significant economic added value. This is a particular finding: from an initial resistance<sup>90</sup> to getting involved with drug trafficking, they had no choice in the face of the dynamics of the sector where new illegal architectures were already gravitating<sup>91</sup>. This is a first indication of the ELN's convergence with the dynamics of other illegal groups; in short, it was absorbed by the rationality of the drug market. A connectivity had thus been established that was no longer just border and local, but global. However, this finding was not initially made visible due to the opacity of illicit organisations, which is one of their structural characteristics<sup>92</sup>, preventing a precise mapping of their dynamics.

In short, it would seem that not only the numbers but also the ELN's genesis discourse ensured its sustainability. However, disruptive factors such as the establishment of the right-wing counter-insurgent paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), whose objective was to dismantle the so-called left-wing organisations (FARC-EP and ELN), had an impact on the ELN's reduced operational capacity. This was due to the occupation of the territory where it moved, especially in the province of Bolívar. In fact, its range of action was in 9 of Colombia's 32 provinces<sup>93</sup>. In addition, due to multiple domestic and regional political pressures, the ELN formally began peace talks with President Álvaro Uribe in Mexico and Cuba (2002-2005), which failed.

The aforementioned failure was also associated with an internal fragmentation of the group as several of the units began to align themselves with the drug traffickers in order to ensure their security and survival, bypassing the leadership's orders. This loss of leadership and unity surely contributed to their marginalisation from the peace talks set up between the FARC-EP and President Juan Manuel Santos, and the subsequent deterioration of attempts to open up the peace accords. In this interlude, ELN killed many military personnel (2012-2013) and continued with attacks on the country's critical oil infrastructure.

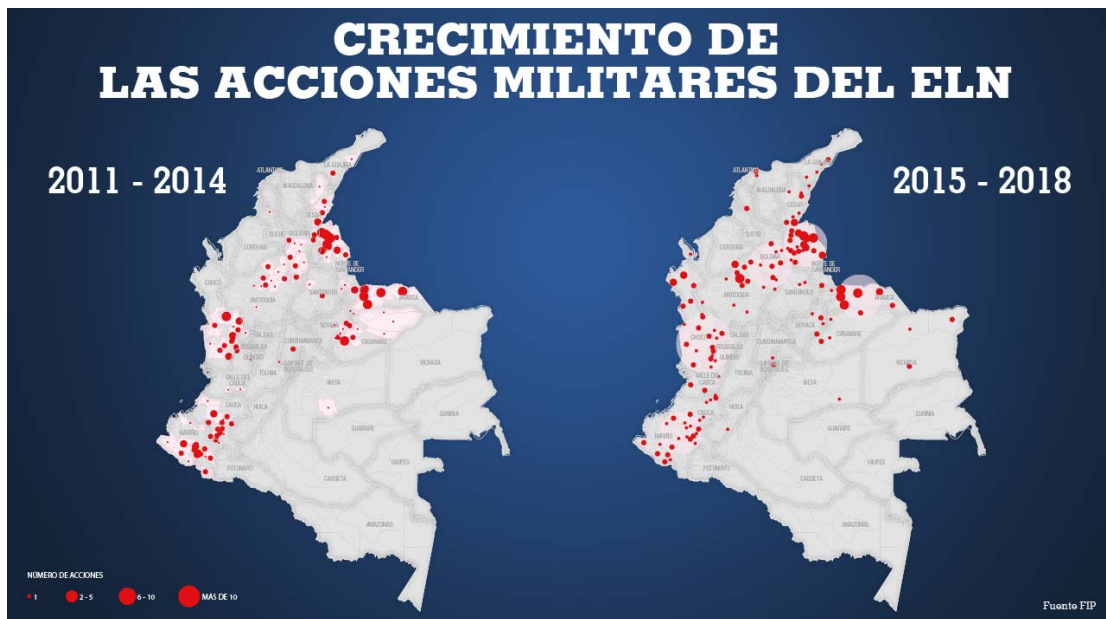
Faced with this new reality, the government of Juan Manuel Santos since June 2014 and the current government of Iván Duque (2018) since the beginning of his term have failed to define an agenda for the construction of a peace agreement. An example of this is the car bomb explosion at the Police College, which was to set a new course. What is certain is that ELN in a pendulum swing of ELN has been regaining its power in conducting tactical manoeuvres, especially taking advantage of the approach of the

90 It refers to the starting conditions for the construction of the future trend.

91 A kind of criminal ecosystem (Matfess and Miklaucic, 2016).

92 Matfess, H. and Michael M. (2016). Introduction. *World Order or Disorder? In Beyond Convergence. World Without Order*. Washington D.C., Center for Complex Operations, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University. P. xviii.

93 They had 43 fronts in rural areas, 10 in urban areas and 22 mobile fronts.



Map 2. ELN tactical empowerment. Source: Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2020

last two governments (Santos and Duque) in the peace agreement and post-agreement with the FARC-EP to try to regain peace for Colombia.

### New trajectories, new dilemmas and new strategic paths

From the above, the ELN shows great resilience, structural flexibility and systemic adaptability to more than five decades of offensives by right-wing paramilitary groups, attacks by governments associated with the United States and other criminal groups. This has been made possible through War Fronts that provide the structural framework for their actions in articulation with Minor Units or individual fronts acting as military battalions. Tactical mutations are associated both with the convergence with new criminal groups and the enhancement of operational capabilities, as well as with the expansion and specialisation of their footprint training. The expansion is visible by a large presence on the Colombian-Venezuelan border with uniformed and formal activity actively in five of Venezuela's 24 states<sup>94</sup>. Marking a trend path for the ELN's new actions and interests reveals a redefinition of its own identity, which appears diffuse. In concrete terms, although it has given the movement greater visibility and in concrete terms it has not been able to articulate a concrete relationship with political power and society in a stable and sustainable way. From the scope of critical security its own identity is fluctuating and its expectations diffuse, particularly in the trajectory from an ideological guerrilla to a narco-guerrilla.

<sup>94</sup> See McDermott, J.(2019). The ELN as a Colombian-Venezuelan insurgent army. *Análisis Insight Crime*, 22 March.

At the same time, from critical security postulates, the political power's recognition of the threat posed by the ELN led to the organisation and use of military means to neutralise it<sup>95</sup>. Thus, the characterisation of the threat by the various governments, especially those of Álvaro Uribe, Juan Manuel Santos and Iván Duque, corresponds to the transition from guerrilla to terrorism, an imaginary forged as a product of a perceptive subjectivity<sup>96</sup> associated with the ELN's new logics of tactical action and the doctrinaire impact of the global war on terror detonated after 9/11 in the United States. What is more, this guerrilla group, baptised as terrorism anchored in a militarised view of security, allowed the group to maintain itself exclusively in rural areas and provinces, with a medium impact in urban areas, although without achieving the positioning of the FARC-EP.

This is compounded by a weakening of its discursive semiotic practices, especially in its public statements that focus on attracting government attention in order to reposition its image and achieve the peace agreement, which over the last four years seems to have been marginalised.

This argument serves to understand a clear mutation of their tactical actions and the current consolidation of around 4,000 men in arms—today with terrorist overtones—evidenced in the car bomb attack on the General Santander Police School in Bogotá (January 2019), and in the 72-hour armed strike (February 2020)<sup>97</sup> to show their deployment to other FARC-EP territories, generating anxiety among the population, above all by preventing mobilisation by land and rivers in the Santander area. This resulted in the *freezing* of the possibilities of a peace agreement with the Duque government. The ELN is involved in a dispute with the Los Pelusos group, a dissident of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) guerrilla group, for control of the Catatumbo area, the second largest drug crop cultivation area in Colombia.

In a critical prospective view, the *future-bearing facts* such as the structural, doctrinal and ideological redefinition of its actions and its convergence with various criminal groups have given the ELN a new image. While there is a palpable fluctuation in the strength of leadership in the Central Command—the structure in charge of force, financial and international operations—its fragmentation is undeniable, especially at the mid-level of the National Directorate and its fronts. Even so, its strengthening, particularly through the control of rents from illegal economies on the border with Venezuela, shows the high probability of continuity and expansion also due to its relationship with civil organisations, which still see the movement as an ideological guerrilla, with the ideal of representing the majority of Colombians excluded from the state's coverage.

95 This guerrilla group played a secondary role to the importance given to the FARC-EP.

96 Saint-Pierre, H.L. (2003). *Las nuevas amenazas como subjetividad perceptiva*. Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina – RESDAL. Pp. 1-10.

97 Both events have curiously targeted the police.

## Between disenchantment and disencounters: What is expected from the ELN? In conclusion

The loss of weight of ideological reasons for the ELN's actions marks a turning point, especially if one considers the attack on the General Santander Police School in the middle of the capital city, with a tragic toll of 10 dead and 27 wounded, a tactical action that managed to break through all security barriers, defying state intelligence, especially police and military intelligence. This attack was described by Colombian expert John Marulanda <sup>98</sup> as an event to put the government on edge in a climate of terror and not a suicide bombing, because neither Latin America nor Colombia has such a vocation. This revealed an emerging and defiant tendency of the ELN towards the government, derived from the formal cessation of peace talks, which also triggered the 72-hour armed strike carried out by this guerrilla group in February 2020.

In the face of these violent actions and their tragic consequences, it is illustrative of the shift in political power, which is sceptical, questioning the viability of negotiations leading to the demobilisation of the ELN, its submission to justice, disarmament and reintegration into civilian life; at the same time, there is no evidence of insistence on resuming these talks on the part of the ELN<sup>99</sup>. The only thing clear in the picture is an offensive militarised response by Duque to national security management.

The various possible and probable futures envisaged for the region and the border areas directly affected is one of permanent disruptive conflict, resulting from the convergence of ELN with other 'criminal' groups in urban areas and with specific actions on the borders; in short, the centre of gravity has shifted. The ideological, discursive and symbolic impacts of the shaping of these new criminal ecosystems in the urban environment are gradually emerging. This complex dynamic has also been altering the declining numbers of terrorist attacks achieved through the inter-agency counter-insurgency policies deployed particularly by the Uribe government - through so-called military strategies to annihilate high-value targets<sup>100</sup>.

The failed peace attempt<sup>101</sup> was fraught with ups and downs. During Santos' term of office, he managed to sign the so-called 'Dialogue Agreement for Peace in Colombia' with his agenda on 30 March 2016, signed with the support of six guarantor countries

---

98 Extract from the interview held by Crnl. (sp) John Marulanda, security expert, on CNN/Colombia, live for Latin America, 17 January 2019 (19:00).

99 Torrijos, V. *Op. cit.*, pp. 679-728.

100 The military strategy of high-value targets is a Colombian version of the strategy adopted by the United States in the framework of the Preventive War, in the 2002 National Security Strategy (high-value target).

101 See the following for more details on the trajectory of the peace talks: <https://repository.oim.org.co/bitstream/handle/20.500.11788/1976/22.%20Spotlight%20Proceso%20de%20Paz%20con%20el%20ELN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

(Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador and Venezuela) as a way of initiating talks to end the armed conflict, which later culminated in a bilateral ceasefire between 1 October 2017 and 9 January 2018, which opened a space of hope for achieving the final objective, but since 29 January 2018 the talks have been suspended due to the deployment of countless violent tactical actions by the ELN, in addition to the suspension by President Lenin Moreno of Ecuador as guarantor for these dialogues, nothing has managed to come together definitively and everything remains shrouded in a cloud of uncertainty and insecurity.

There is a space of continuous misunderstandings and dizzying changes, particularly in the sensitive areas of the Colombian-Ecuadorian and Colombian-Venezuelan borders, which demand redefinitions in terms of domestic, border and regional security governance. The configuration of multilevel and multi-actor spaces, of discontinuities and heterogeneity, of synergies and misunderstandings is common; therefore, a framework of dissimilar positions and stances, of breaking points and fissures between state and non-state actors, elites, pressure groups, civil society, is the framework in which an attempt is being made to consolidate a Peace Agreement with the ELN. A spirit of distrust and doubt revolves around the competing power games between negotiators, key negotiating actors and especially civil society regarding the possibility of achieving sustainability as a long-term process<sup>102</sup>.

The new rationalities of the ELN have moved the chessboard of political and social relations in an ambivalent way, with heterogeneous signs. Apparently, the goal of seizing political power by force and implementing a socialist model is far from being achieved. However, it must be taken into account that just as they managed to move quickly to the centre of Bogotá, they could well be moving through the Ecuadorian Amazon strategic corridor in the province of Sucumbíos in Ecuador. This is where Ecuador's most significant strategic oil infrastructure is located, in convergence and support with illegal groups linked to drug trafficking. If the ELN made a drastic change, unthinkable in the operational scenario, it is not unreasonable to think that it could have the Ecuadorian oil infrastructure as a key target, prior to recruiting young people and minors to increase its strength.

In fact, the ELN as a threat to the security of the Colombian state with regional projection has *chameleonically* modified its identity and interests in a situational and convenient manner. This is why analytics are needed to understand the emerging rationalities of ELN in complexity and critically beyond the militarised state view and its responses. The new forms of tactical action, their geographical points of penetration and scope must be understood in context, as well as the rearrangements of the response strategies of the various state apparatuses, in an anticipatory, preventive manner, in a dynamic of continuous 'transitoriness'. The aim, then, is to design timely and real-time strategic balances of both states and their institutional defence

---

102 Adler, A. (2016). *Securing Peace in the Borderlands. A Post- Agreement Strategy for Colombia*. Edited by Department of Politics & International Relations. Pp. 1-7.

architectures that must respond to environments of crisis, complexity, contradictions and change.

From a critical approach to security, the challenge is to incorporate multi-systemic and flexible tools of observation and analysis of the threat (ELN) in order to situate it also in the so-called *semantics of emancipation*, i.e., the capacity to unveil the relationship between its real existence and that which is instrumentalised and politicised by domestic political and military elites or by international pressure. This methodological line is very useful for unveiling the writing of threat in a critical sense and not simply as a 'denomination' that legitimises the exercise of state power by prioritising the military response.

The aim is to redefine the role of the state as a means and not an end in security, respect for human beings and their rights, and the role and nature of the discourses that are constructed around the threat 'officially' and the need to rethink them. Challenging the security outlook therefore aims to rethink and re-dimension the volatile and changing present, in order to have key inputs that contribute to the development of a prospective exercise between the state, decision-makers, security operators and other social actors. After all, *freezing the present is useless*. A critical foresight exercise involving multiple actors with social responsibility is needed to construct long-term security responses, given that it is better to anticipate and warn than to try to remedy the often irreversible effects and implications, such as the lives lost in the latest ELN actions.

Critical foresight is useful in that it prioritises high-value responses to complex problems. Thus, in order to consolidate a sustainable peace process with the ELN, it is necessary to think about assistance, support and social development programmes, inter-agency security and defence strategies, and the presence of local and regional actors to participatively build the best space and conditions for sustainable peace, as long as the threat has been understood in its various dimensions, and not seen as *a missing piece* of the great puzzle of conflict in Colombia.

Precisely for this reason, tending towards the construction of multiple scenarios of: order/disorder, of the foreseen/unforeseen, of the regular/irregular, of continuity/rupture in the behaviour of the threat, by considering that this threat is marking unusual patterns of identity that are more flexible and mutant, by way of acts of identification<sup>103</sup>, in reference to its tactical actions aligned with the type of organisation (with a line of command) and within a criminal ideological and ecosystemic culture.

Finally, the challenge is on the table. Disciplinary convergence and the theoretical, methodological and analytical possibilities provided by critical perspectives on security and foresight enable a comprehensive understanding of new security phenomena. The definition of priorities, the resolution of tensions, the understanding of muta-

---

103 Berndt, B. (2016). Revisiting identity in International Relations, from identity as substance to identification in action. *European Journal of International Relations*. Pp. 1-26.

tions, the management of uncertainty, the handling of contemporary nomenclatures, among others, are the best way for academia to support institutional transformation, doctrinal reorientation in security and governance in defence, and in short, to humanise present knowledge in order to build the best possible courses of action in the midst of crisis and permanent change.

## Bibliography

- Acharya, A. (2011). The Third World and Security Studies. In Christopher Hughes and Yew Ming Lai (eds.). *Security Studies: a reader*. New York, Routledge. Pp. 1-20.
- Adler, A. (2016). Securing Peace in the Borderlands. *A Post- Agreement Strategy for Colombia*. Edited by Department of Politics & International Relations. Pp. 1-7.
- Agius, C. (2013). Social Constructivism. In Allan Collins (ed.). *Contemporary Security Studies*. London, Oxford University Press. Pp. 96-110. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198708315.003.0006>
- Baena, G. (2013). *Prospectiva política*. México D.F., Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales. Proyecto Papime de Prospectiva Política. Dirección General de Personal Académico. Guía para la comprensión y práctica.
- Baldwin, D. (1997). Security Studies and the End of the Cold War. *World Politics*, 48, (1), pp. 117-14. HYPERLINK <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c6b7/a2577eeof-72716f4b9f25f685979b1a81957.pdf>
- Berndt, B. (2016). Revisiting identity in International Relations. From identity as substance to identification in action. *European Journal of International Relations*. Pp. 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116644035>
- Bolaños, E. (2019). El sicariato está acabando con la vida de los exguerrilleros. *El Espectador newspaper*. 23 June.
- Booth, K. (2005). *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*. London, Lynne Rienner Publishers. Pp. 259 - 279.
- (2013). Seguridad y emancipación. *Relaciones Internacionales*. Grupo de Estudios de Relaciones Internacionales. Pp. 99-116.
- Brauch, H. (2011). Concepts of Security Threats, Challenges, Vulnerabilities and Risks. In H.G. Brauch (ed.). *Coping with Global Environment Change, Disasters and Security*. Berlin, Springer. Pp. 61-75.
- HYPERLINK [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-17776-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-17776-7_2) [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-17776-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-17776-7_2)
- Buzan, B. (1991). *People, States and Fear: and agenda for International Security Studies in the Post Cold War Era*. London, Harvester Wheatsheaf. Pp. 12-25.

- Collins, A. (2013). *Contemporary Security Studies*. London, Oxford University Press. Pp. 27-40.
- Cha, V.D. (2000). Globalization and the Study of International Security. *Journal of Peace Research*, 37, (1), pp. 391-403. DOI 10.1177/0022343300037003007.
- Ombudsman's Office (2017). *Grupos armados ilegales y nuevos escenarios de riesgo en el posacuerdo*. Bogotá. Pp. 1-30.
- Farah, D. (2016). Convergence in Criminalized States. The New Paradigm. In Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic. *Beyond Convergence. World Without Order*. Washington D.C., Center for Complex Operations, Institute for National Strategic Studies. Pp. 179-233.
- Fundación Ideas para La Paz (2020a). *¿Qué hacer con el ELN? Opciones ante una derrota militar lejana y un diálogo improbable. Notas estratégicas*. Various authors. Bogotá. January, pp. 1-50.
- (2020b). *France 24*. [Consulted: 2020]. <https://www.france24.com/es/20200214-colombia-eln-paro-armado-ivan-duque>
- García, B. (2018). Presencia de carteles de la droga en Ecuador. Interview on Vision radio. Wednesday 19 December.
- Idler, A. (2016). Securing Peace in the Borderlands. *A Post- Agreement Strategy for Colombia*. Edited by Department of Politics & International Relations. Pp. 1-7.
- Insight Crime (2020). *Game Changers 2019: 10 predictions for Organized Crime in 2020*. January, pp. 1- 15.
- International Crisis Group (2014). The Day after Tomorrow: Colombia's FARC and the End of the Conflict. *Latin America Report*. Brussels. December. [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1232911/1002\\_1418495698\\_053-the-day-after-tomorrow-colombia-s-farc-and-the-end-of-the-conflict.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1232911/1002_1418495698_053-the-day-after-tomorrow-colombia-s-farc-and-the-end-of-the-conflict.pdf)
- (2019). *El peso del oro: violencia en el sur de Venezuela*. Latin America Report No. 73-24 August.
- National Chief of the Armyoperational Staff (2018). Relámpago rojo. La estrategia para neutralizar a ELN. *Revista del Ejército de Colombia* 194, (1). [https://dicoe.mil.co/revista\\_ejercito/revista/Revista\\_194/relampago-rojo-la-estrategia-para-neutralizar-al-eln.html](https://dicoe.mil.co/revista_ejercito/revista/Revista_194/relampago-rojo-la-estrategia-para-neutralizar-al-eln.html)
- Keohane, R. (1989). *International Institutions and State Power*. Boulder, Westview Press. Pp. 1-15.
- Leongómez, E. (2015). A multiple and pluralistic reading of history. In *Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia*. Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas. Bogotá, Ediciones desde abajo. Pp. 17-104.
- LEvy, J. (1989). The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, (1), pp. 139-165. HYPERLINK <http://fas-polisci.rutgers>.

- edu/levy/articles/1998%20causes%20of%20war%20&%20conditions%20of%20peace.Pdf
- Matfess, H. and Miklaucic, M. (2016). Introduction. World Order or Disorder? In Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic. *Beyond Convergence. World Without Order*. Washington D.C., Center for Complex Operations, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University. Pp. ix-xviii.
- Morgan, P. (2013). Liberalism. En Allan Collins (ed.). *Contemporary Security Studies*. New York, Oxford University Press. Pp. 28-41.
- Morgenthau, H. (1993). *Politics Among Nations: the struggle for power and peace*. New York, Thompson, McGraw-Hill. Pp. 25-26.
- Nye, J. and Lynn-Jones, S. (1998). International Security Studies: a report of a conference on the state and the field. *International Security*, 12, (4), pp. 5-27.
- Ramírez, J.G. (2015). Política y guerra sin compasión. In *Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia*, by Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas. Bogotá, Ediciones desde abajo. Pp. 471-518.
- Ripley, B. (1993). Foreign Policy and International Relations Theory. *Political Psychology*, Vol 14, (3), Pp. 403-416.
- Rojas, F. (2012). *Seguridad Internacional, el espacio y posición de América Latina*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Teseo. Pp. 21-26. HYPERLINK <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/Articulo/4172727.pdf>
- Saint-Pierre, H.L. (2003). Las nuevas amenazas como subjetividad perceptiva. Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL). Pp. 1-10.
- Smith, S. (1999). Increasing Insecurity of Security Studies: conceptualizing security in the last twenty years. *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol 20, (3), Pp. 72-101. DOI: 10.1080/1352326990840423.
- Stanford University (2015). Mapping Militant Organization. *National Liberation Army*. Pp. 1-18. <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/maps/view/colombia>
- Terradas, N. (2009). El dilema de la seguridad y su importancia para el estudio de las relaciones internacionales. *Letras Internacionales Magazine*. Universidad Ort Uruguay, 88(3), Pp. 1-7.
- Telesurtv.net (2016). *Lo que debe saber del Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)*. [Access: 2020]. <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/ELN-una-fuerza-colombiana-que-combate-a-las-oligarquias-20160330-0030.html>
- Torrijos, V. (2015). Cartografía del conflicto. Pautas interpretativas sobre la evolución del conflicto irregular colombiano. In *Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia*, by Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas. Ediciones desde abajo. Pp. 679-728.

- Ullman, R. (2011). Redefining Security. In Christopher Hughes and Yew Ming Lai (eds.). *Security Studies: a reader*. New York, Routledge. Pp. 11-17.
- UNODC (2018). Report on Coca Crop Monitoring in Colombia. UN. P. 24.
- Vargas, A. (2018). La Fuerza Pública: una institución Nacional. *Revista Ola Política*, Opinion Section, 15 December. <https://olapolitica.com/opinion/la-fuerza-publica-una-institucion-nacional/>
- Walt, S. (1989). Why alliances endure or collapse? *Survival*, 39, (1), pp. 27-40.
- Williams, P. (2013). *Security Studies: an introduction*. New York, Routledge. Pp. 15-25.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is What States Make of it: the social construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, vole 46, (2), pp. 391-425. HYPERLINK <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858> www.jstor.org/stable/2706858
- Wyn, R. (1999). *Security, Strategy, and Critical Theory*. London, Lynne Rienner Publishers. Pp. 100-125.
- (2007). Message in a bottle? Theory and Praxis y Critical Security Studies. *Contemporary Security Policy* 16, (3), pp. 299-319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523269508404119>

---

*Article received: 6 May 2020.*

*Article accepted: 8 April 2021.*

---