

ANALYZING THE EXPANSIONIST ACTIONS OF COLOMBIA'S MAJOR ARMED NON STATE ACTORS

This report by the Castleberry Peace Institute analyzes the expansionist goals and actions of the major armed non-state actors in Colombia. We analyze data from the Colombian government and other open-source materials to write brief descriptions of these activities, the challenges they pose to peace and security, and future prospects for addressing the presence of these armed groups in Colombia. We provide a summary of the expansionist strategies and actions of the four largest of the armed non state actors.

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Analysis of the Expansion Patterns of the The National Liberation Army (ELN)

The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) is a Marxist-Leninist guerilla group founded in 1964. Created by leftist students and priests (notably Fabio Vasquez Castano) during Colombia's post-La Violencia era, the ELN combined revolutionary socialism with Catholic liberation ideologies [1, 2]. At the beginning the ELN only numbered in the dozens, but it quickly grew into a major insurgency. In 1978, the Colombian Army had reduced the ELN to "little more than thirty compañeros" [3], but the ELN survived and was prospering by the 2000s. The ELN functioned on an anti-state and anti-imperialist ideology from the very beginning, with the intention of overthrowing Colombia's government in favor of a socialist regime. Influential figures were Father Camilo Torres (a priest who joined the guerillas and died in combat in 1966) [4], and leaders like Manuel "El Cura" Perez and Nicolas "Gabino" Rodriguez who rebuilt the group after the 1970s [5].

Today, the ELN is Colombia's last major leftist insurgency. The ELN claims 5,000-6,000 combatants from Colombia to Venezuela [7]. The group operates under a Central Command called the COCE, but its ground operations are through various semi-autonomous regional combat fronts. The ELN's strongholds are in rural and border areas such as Norte de Santander (Catatumbo) and Antioquia [8]. In more recent decade's bases in Venezuela have also been maintained through alliances with the governments led by Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro [9, 10]. The ELN has even been described as part of a broader "Bolivarian" alliance, with its sub-units "subordinate strategically to the Communist Party of Cuba and to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela" [10]. Guerilla warfare and criminal enterprise have been the ELN's main tactics. Early on, the ELN financed itself through high-profile kidnappings and extortions. One notable hostage operation was in 1999, when the ELN conducted Colombia's largest-ever hostage operation by hijacking a passenger plane to a remote jungle, kidnaping over a hundred passengers [11]. The ELN has also bombed oil pipelines and abducted foreign oil workers while labelling these tactics as "war taxes" on the petroleum industry [12]. In the 1980s, the ELN had an official front (the Domingo Lain Front) that extorted multinationals drilling for oil in Arauca [12], and the ELN slowly entered the cocaine and illegal mining industries [13, 14] to fund their growing operations. By the 2010s, analysts note that the ELN controlled major drug-producing regions and smuggling routes, consolidating their status as powerful criminal actors as well as an insurgent force [15, 16].

Despite all the ELN's criminal activity, its leaders have always claimed a political focus. The ELN has reportedly entered peace talks with Colombia's government, and they most recently joined President Petro's "Total Peace" initiative in 2022 [17, 18]. While in theory the ELN wishes to end conflict via negotiation, in practice the ELN remains engaged in armed struggle. As a whole, the ELN can be thought of as Colombia's last true insurgency, as they blend ideological rhetoric with criminal methods and continually adapt their tactics and alliances to survive.

Methods of Expansion

Filling security vacuums and alliances left behind by other groups has been a huge part of the ELN's growth. After the 2016 FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) demobilization, it rapidly expanded into former FARC territories in southern and western Colombia [16]. Since 2017, analysts have noted that the ELN continues to expand throughout Colombia, taking advantage of the FARC's absence and even creating pacts with smaller guerilla factions [16]. Regions like Putumayo and Guaviere have also been taken into alliances with dissident FARC splinter groups. Essentially, the ELN has taken advantage of weak state authority or lack of rival groups, quickly moving in to set up fronts and assert control.

ELN expansion has followed a multi-step process consisting of territorial penetration, coercion, and consolidation. Penetration is conducted through small, low-visibility units or political emissaries that establish initial contact with local communities, criminal actors, and informal authorities. At this stage, direct confrontation is avoided in favor of reconnaissance. Once a foothold is established, the ELN begins to employ violence to target the local power structure. Violence is usually intentional with specific individuals like resistant community leaders, rival actors, or suspected collaborators with the state selected as targets. Such targeted violence serves the dual function of eliminating opposition while sending a message to the broader population regarding the consequences of resistance.

Illicit economies have been key to ELN expansion as they seek to diversify funding. Kidnapping and extortion were the original methods to finance their growth, and the ELN has also branched into lucrative drug trades and illegal mining. By the 2000s, some fronts of the ELN were producing cocaine themselves, and others collected "taxes" on coca growers and traffickers [14]. In southwestern Colombia, the ELN entered gold and logging operations. In Venezuela, the ELN supervises mining activities in Bolivar and Amazonas states under the "blessing" of pro-government sectors [21]. The ELN uses these illicit economies to produce revenue, which is used to buy weapons, bribe government officials, and recruit members, all of which have contributed to the ELN expanding their territory and power.

The ELN has used the Venezuelan territory as a rear base, and this base has been a defining method of expansion. The ELN's ties with the Chavez/Maduro administrations have turned Colombia's eastern border into a sanctuary zone. Smuggling routes and military corridors between Colombia and Venezuela have been dominated by the ELN [9, 10]. The ELN have been known to retreat into Venezuela, and some commanders have even relocated to Venezuela to remotely direct operations [2, 9, 22]. Colombian counterinsurgency efforts have been made more difficult thanks to the ELN's binational presence.

Guerilla tactics have been the ELN's main battlefield tactic. Ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, and explosive devices have been preferred over direct assaults. Terrorist-style operations in urban areas have also been used: car bombs and other explosives have struck public targets in the past. Assassinations and kidnappings of government officials have also been common tactics meant to intimidate authorities. Experts have noted that the ELN prefers a more cautious tactical approach, with ambushes and IED tactics rather than large-scale battles [11, 16].

Building local support has been another key method for the ELN. Propaganda and community outreach in outer regions that have been neglected have allowed the ELN to recruit indigenous people, peasants, and urban intellectuals. Civilians in these areas that have benefitted from the ELN's grassroots work have created a strong social base that blurs the line between civilians and combatants. They have also imposed informal regulatory systems that govern inhabitants' daily lives through things like curfews, movement restrictions, and behavioral codes. Dispute resolution is also another method to consolidate their authority. Control is further reinforced with economic integration and coercion. The ELN's continual preaching of social inequality has given them strong footholds in communities like parts of Arauca and Choco, where the ELN has been known to establish schools or dispute-resolution councils.

In the future, the ELN's trajectory will likely hinge upon interactions between state capacity and the persistence of territorial vacuums across the periphery of Colombia. The ELN has continued to expand in spite of ongoing negotiations under President Petro's "Total Peace" initiative. As Petro's administration reaches its conclusion, successor governments may shift towards a more hybrid counterinsurgency strategy, combining negotiation with targeted military pressure. Future policy will likely prioritize reasserting state authority in contested regions by investing in infrastructure in historically neglected areas and therefore disrupting the illicit economies that fund ELN operations. However, any strategy relying fully on military might is unlikely to yield lasting results because of the ELN's decentralized structure and deeply embedded status in local economies. The Colombian state's greatest challenge will be in pursuing a long-term territorial consolidation strategy where security operations are paired with sustained institutional development. If the Colombian government proceeds without this dual approach, then they are unlikely to gain any ground against the ELN who will continue to exploit governance gaps.

The ELN's persistence highlights the broader challenges of peacebuilding in Colombia's post-conflict environment. The ELN has embedded itself deep within local governance structures and illicit economies, meaning efforts against them must focus on military capacity along with the social and economic systems that sustain the ELN. In several regions, the ELN is relied upon to bring about order in the absence of state institutions, meaning demobilization becomes further complicated. Therefore, further peacebuilding strategies will need to prioritize community-

centered approaches such as reintegration programs and creation of legal economic alternatives to coca cultivation and illegal mining.

In addition, several avenues for future research are viable. The micro-level dynamics of ELN governance, particularly in relation to civilian responses to insurgent authority, is a fascinating example. Comparative analysis between the ELN, FARC dissidents, and EGC may further clarify expansion and resilience across different organizational structures. Finally, as the ELN continues to grow its presence in Venezuela, the need for further research in transnational insurgent networks and the associated implications for conflict resolution is ever more apparent. Addressing these avenues therefore become essential for developing effective long-term strategies to reduce violence and consolidate peace in Colombia.

Analysis of the Expansion Patterns of the Gaitanist Army of Colombia (EGC, or Clan de Golfo)

The expansion of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), also known as the Clan de Golfo can be seen when examining data provided in the Colombian government's Sistema de Alertas Tempranas (SAT)—(Defensoría del Pueblo reporting (<https://alertastempranas.defensoria.gov.co/>)). These data demonstrate that the expansion of the EGC is neither random nor purely opportunistic. Rather, the EGC follows predictable patterns in its exploitation of government weakness/absence in certain areas of Colombia, and the exploitation of other opportunities occasioned by the absence or weakness of other armed non-state actors such as the National Liberation Army (ELN). There is a geographic logic of its pattern of territorial control and its typical modus operandi for exploiting opportunities for expansion.

The EGC is now Colombia's most geographically expansive armed actor. It is associated with 54% of all SAT alerts (2017–2024). The EGC expanded from 213 to 392 municipalities (2019–2024), and has a presence in 24 of 32 departments (~75% of Colombian territory).¹ This expansion is especially notable because it typically comes at the expense of other armed, non state actors such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and various FARC splinter groups that are still active.

Based on our analysis of the SAT data, as well as other publicly available data, reports and academic articles, and through a Chat GPT analysis of the SAT data, we offer the following observations regarding the expansionist tendencies of the EGC. To gain an understanding of these expansionist tendencies to better predict when these dangerous situations are likely to occur or imminent, we begin by analyzing when these expansionist moves might take place. We focus on the events and situations that would seem to suggest that an armed expansionist move by the EGC would be likely.

What triggers EGC expansion? First, and most importantly we find that the enduring problem of low governance zones in the more remote, rural and marginalized portions of the Colombian countryside continues to attract the interest and activities of armed non state actors. In particular, in the aftermath of the 2016 peace treaty between the Colombian government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), those regions of Colombia once dominated by the FARC have now become the sites of battles for control of lucrative areas for coca cultivation, transportation corridors, access to mining sites, and other economic resources. While the peace treaty with the FARC may have envisioned that the Colombian government would fill in these spaces with the provision of security, infrastructure and government services, the government's

¹ Information found at <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/urabenos-profile/>

absence in large tracts of the country continues. The absence of governance leads to the presence of criminal organizations.

Relatedly, the data also show that it is precisely these areas where the FARC once held sway that are now the principal zones of inter-group conflict among the armed non-state actors. In many of these same stronghold areas, we see the remnants of the FARC devolve into two main splinter groups that are also riven with factionalism—the Central General Staff and the Second Marquetalia—although there are several other smaller groups as well. We find expansion occurring where rival groups are involved in combat with one another and where local armed actors lack the scale necessary to resist EGC incursion.

Second, EGC expansion is associated with movement into coca-growing zones; areas in which there are illegal gold mines; and areas that contain strategic trafficking corridors including riverine, coastal, and border areas, especially with Venezuela and Ecuador. The EGC is interested principally in enhancing its profits and where opportunities present themselves for establishing a foothold in a region. They will seize and exploit such opportunities as recently occurred in the north and northeast regions of Colombia, and along the border with Venezuela. In fact, Colombian government data show that 92% of EGC-linked alerts involve narco-trafficking economies. More generally, the EGC is not expanding to hold continuous territory, but to build a network of strategically connected areas of domination tied to illicit economies.

When the EGC undertakes expansion, it typically follows a set of steps that allow the organization to gradually expand influence over an area before consolidating control. The first step in this process is the initial penetration of a town, village or region through the use of small units or perhaps more visible emissaries that will establish contact with local criminal networks and local community leaders. These contacts represent the first forays of less aggressive strategies for co-option and ultimately, control of a community. The EGC begins exercising more overt and demanding levels of social control through selective violence and extra judicial killings, forced displacement, recruitment of new members including minors and the confinement of communities.

The confinement of community members in their homes is often a result of EGC military actions. The EGC frequently displays its power to challenge regional and national authorities. For example, when EGC leaders are killed or captured by the government, the EGC will often shut down transportation routes, order a halt to all commercial activity and force residents to remain in-doors. Their violence is very selective and targeted and designed to communicate a message to the community about the necessity of cooperation and the dangers of disobedience. Community curfews are also often used to control the population as well. Warnings may be sent out to those individuals the EGC considers undesirable, such as sex workers, drug addicts, the homeless and other marginalized populations, that their presence is not desired. These individuals may be forced to hide, to leave or they may be executed in one of the EGC's displays of selective violence.

The EGC will also typically become involved in local authority structures to control government spending, ensure obedience and identify new sources of revenue. The EGC, like most criminal structures, imposes fees or taxes on those who fall within its ambit of control to finance their criminal and non-criminal activities. In exchange for payment of these taxes, also called “vacuna” or vaccination, the residents are supposed to enjoy a modicum of safety and protection and some types of governance services in exchange for their obedience, silence and cooperation when sought.

The SAT data shows that the EGC is most heavily represented in the departments of Antioquia, Chocó, Córdoba, and Bolívar, which have historically been zones of strong paramilitary control. Increasingly, the EGC is expanding into the Pacific coast including Nariño, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, especially for the maritime export routes and Caribbean international trafficking. The EGC is found often in the riverine systems associated with the Atrato and Magdalena rivers, as well as in gold mining areas in Bolívar and Chocó. It is also heavily involved in regulating the Darien Gap region on the border with Panama to profit from the sizeable number of immigrants heading north to the United States. The EGC also exercises control over transport and trade routes, mining operations and coca supply chains.

The EGC tends to become involved in armed clashes with the ELN and the FARC splinter groups in the north of Colombia. In some areas there may be informal agreements or modes of cooperation that allow these groups to avoid costly combat. This is especially likely to be the case in areas that are prominent in drug cultivation and transportation. In addition, the EGC works with international drug cartels from Mexico as part of their supply chain, which in turn provides increased profits for weapons.

In general, the EGC expands not so much to create full territorial control, but rather builds corridors and hubs to facilitate expansion and profitability. It expands more through a franchise type process in which local groups become subsumed under the EGC brand in exchange for their obedience and profits. In return, these smaller criminal structures receive protection and guaranteed shares of profits from illicit activities. The EGC is generally rational in its pursuit of expansion opportunities and does so when such expansion intersects with weak governance and where there are profits to be made from a lack of or weak competition. Wherever the EGC expands it uses a wide variety of tools to ensure local social, political and economic support for their objectives to maximize profits and reduce costs, especially in social control and security. Hence, the violence necessary to support this dominance and these structures is targeted and victims are selected for particular reasons rather than to send a “message” to the community.

We can expect that the EGC will continue to expand in those traditional areas of control and seek to wrest profitable locales, transportation routes, ports and similar places in areas where other armed groups are operating, especially at diminished capacity, where government presence

is marginal at best, and where profitable. The Colombian government's efforts to reach agreements with the EGC during the Gustavo Petro administration through the Total Peace initiative have largely failed to halt their activities. More aggressive measures through the occasional armed clash with government forces have also failed to make an impact on EGC expansion, which continues to grow apace and shows no signs of abating. Future administrations will be forced to consider whether to make some type of arrangements with this ever-expanding army or whether to engage in more direct military action. To date, the alternation of strategies of cooperation and coercion have not halted the territorial gains made by the EGC, nor have they diminished its ability to recruit more personnel and expand its operations. The next Colombian president will likely be faced with a stark choice over the costs and benefits of strategies of negotiation and strategies of confrontation.

Analysis of the Expansion Patterns of the Dissident FARC groups—EMC (Estado Mayor Central) and the Segunda Marquetalia

Dissident FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia groups—People’s Army) including the EMC (Estado Mayor Central or Central General Staff) and the Segunda Marquetalia or Second Marquetalia are the two most prominent FARC splinter groups. Both groups have sought to expand their territorial reach across Colombia and especially in areas where the FARC dominated during the many years of war with the Colombian government. They are present in some 230-290 municipalities in Colombia across 15–19 departments according to data from Insight Crime.² Both groups seek to claim the mantle of leadership from the original FARC and continue to ostensibly emphasize their aim of establishing socialism/communism in Colombia. Both groups would argue that those goals were betrayed, in their perception, by those who reached a peace agreement with the Colombian government. However, their political project has taken on far less importance than the illicit activities in which all groups engage. Hence, their expansionist tendencies lead them, in particular the EMC, to seek territorial control in lands that were originally part of the FARC center of gravity in Southern Tolima, Meta, Caquetá, Cauca, and Nariño and where opportunities persist to realize profits from illicit activities.

The expansion efforts of both groups involve competition for territorial control; movement into key transportation routes; increased confrontations and violence with other armed groups including the ELN (National Liberation Army), the EGC (Gaitanista Army of Colombia) and violence against citizens and their former FARC comrades. Estimates from the Colombian government and other news sources such as Reuters put the total number of troops in the EMC as somewhere between 3500-3900 while the Segunda Marquetalia is smaller at somewhere between 1600-1700 troops or affiliated supporters, although these numbers can be highly variable as some factions break away while others join forces with one of these two large splinter groups.³

Both FARC splinter groups are especially focused on expansion into areas where coca is cultivated and transportation routes and illegal mining are located to fund their operation. To realize profits from these illicit activities, territorial, social and political control is pursued in key areas. Both splinter groups, much like the EGC and ELN regulate local economies, impose restrictions on mobility and certain behaviors to dominate populations to create a base of support) and replace whatever Colombian government presence there might have been.

In addition to these typical strategies for territorial control, the FARC-EP splinter groups continue to displace populations, including their former comrades whose presence in ETCR’s

² Information found at <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/ex-farc-mafia-central-general-staff/> and <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/segunda-marquetalia/>

³ Information found at <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/ex-farc-mafia-central-general-staff/> and <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/segunda-marquetalia/>

(Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation) near strongholds of these groups has resulted in significant violence and disruption for their demobilized, former comrades. Indeed, one author witnessed an entire FARC ETCR being dismantled and the population moved to a safer location because a FARC dissident group was threatening their community. In keeping with FARC tactics employed during the war with the Colombian government, these groups also target social leaders as threats to their dominance. They recruit minors to supplement their personnel strength, which is not nearly so great as the EGC and ELN. Hence, their expansionist activities create a variety of negative political, social and economic hazards.

The dissident FARC groups tend to practice a gradual expansionist effort in which there is discreet infiltration of communities with small units to avoid detection by the government or their other, armed competitors. The Segunda Marquetalia has also pursued a territorial expansion strategy along the border with Venezuela to facilitate smuggling, movement of fighters into safe zones, and other efforts at exploiting for profit the lack of government presence along some parts of the border.

Both organizations expand strategically into certain areas associated with illegal enterprises and their profits, an absence of governmental authority, and historical domination of certain areas. Both groups are opportunistic in their decisions regarding temporary alliances with other armed groups and violent competition with these same groups. Where the absence of other armed groups presents an opportunity to be exploited through traditional territorial domination strategies, or the presence of these groups poses a threat to the viability of either group in a particular region, they will attack or retreat strategically, much like they did when they were part of the FARC insurgency strategy and guerilla warfare.

Both groups combine the threat and use violence and the lure of peace and participation in peace negotiations strategically. Negotiations lend the groups some degree of political legitimacy. They also create time to recruit and train personnel to expand their operations surreptitiously and expand forms of social control in the regions they dominate to cement their authority while flying below the government and human rights community's radar. Despite numerous efforts by the Colombian government to negotiate with the fronts or their own splinter groups, little progress has been made, and these two groups continue to challenge the authority of the Colombian government. The government's strategy of negotiation has yielded few tangible results with these splinter groups that continue to find ways to maintain their strength and the threaten peaceful parts of Colombia. While it is possible that the Colombian government may be able to lure some factions within these splinter groups to give up their arms and control, the sporadic and inconsistent nature of the Petro government's negotiations with the groups has made the realization of any workable peace agreement and DDR arrangement quite difficult. Future administrations will need to determine if such divide and conquer strategies will ever yield any strategic benefit or security gains.

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