

Geopolitical Importance of the Darien Gap in the Colombian Post-conflict Context*

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Abstract

This article identifies the geopolitical importance of the Darien region for the construction of a future Colombian foreign policy towards post-conflict. The paper starts from the consideration that Colombia has historically lacked a clear, coherent and long-term strategy towards the exploitation of its geopolitical potentialities. Therefore, post-conflict is presented as an opportunity to change this issue. The method used is descriptive in nature and a geopolitical analysis matrix is constructed, composed of the following variables: territory, population, representations, external relations and actual problems of Darien. Harnessing the geopolitical potential of Darien would allow Colombia not only to become a regional power, but also to complement and develop national policies such as strengthening tourism and the sustainable exploitation of natural resources.

Keywords

Geopolitics, Darien, Colombia, foreign policy, post-conflict.

JEL classification

N4, N46, H5, H56

Contents

Introduction; 1. Colombia's geo-political regions; 2. Geopolitics in Colombian foreign policy; 3. Geopolitical contextualization of the Darien region; 4. Conclusions; References.



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Importancia geopolítica de la Región del Darién en el contexto del posconflicto colombiano

Resumen

El artículo identifica la importancia geopolítica del Darién para la construcción de una futura política exterior colombiana de cara al posconflicto. Parte de la consideración que Colombia, históricamente ha carecido de una estrategia clara, coherente y de largo plazo dirigida al aprovechamiento de las potencialidades geopolítica, y, por lo tanto, el posconflicto se presenta como una oportunidad de terminar con esta carencia. El método empleado es de carácter descriptivo y se construye una matriz de análisis geopolítico compuesta por las variables de: territorio, población, representaciones, relaciones externas y problemáticas del Darién. El aprovechamiento del potencial geopolítico del Darién, permitiría a Colombia, no solo constituirse como potencia media regional, sino también el complementar y desarrollar políticas nacionales como el fortalecimiento del turismo y explotación sostenible de recursos naturales.

Palabras clave

Geopolítica, Darién, Colombia, política exterior, posconflicto.

Clasificación JEL

N4, N46, H5, H56

Contenido

Introducción; 1. Regiones geopolíticas de Colombia; 2. La geopolítica en la política exterior colombiana; 3. Contextualización política en la región del Darién; 4. Conclusiones; Referencias.

Importância geopolítica da Região do Darién no contexto do pós-conflito colombiano

Resumo

O artigo identifica a importância geopolítica da região do Darién para a construção de uma futura política externa colombiana diante ao pós-conflito. Parte da consideração que a Colômbia historicamente não tem uma estratégia clara, coerente e de longo prazo visando a exploração do potencial geopolítico e, portanto, o pós-conflito apresenta-se como uma oportunidade para acabar com essa falta. O método utilizado é descritivo e foi construída uma matriz de análise geopolítica composta pelas variáveis de: território, população, representações, relações externas e problemas da região do Darién. Aproveitar o potencial geopolítica da região, permitiria que a Colômbia, não só se tornasse um poder médio regional, mas também para complementar a desenvolver políticas nacionais como o fortalecimento do turismo e a exploração sustentável dos recursos naturais.

Palavras-chave

Geopolítica, Darién, Colômbia, política externa, pós-conflito.

Classificação JEL

N4, N46, H5, H56

Conteúdo

Introdução; 1. Regiões geopolíticas da Colômbia; 2. Geopolítica na política externa colombiana; 3. A contextualização política na região de Darién; 4. Conclusões; Referências.

Introduction

Throughout its history, the government of Colombia, its military forces and all its other institutions have had an inability to make its presence felt and control efficiently the country's territory. Since 1830, the Republic of Colombia has lost territories due to several reasons and by different means; taking into account that it has five land-neighboring countries These territories had important strategic value among them there was the Amazonian trapezoid via Vasquez-Cobo-Martin's treaty in 1907 and Garcia Ortiz - Mangabeira (1928) a treaty with Brazil and the Lozano Salomon treaty in 1922 with Peru, and when the isthmus of Panama was lost because the canal region declared its independence on November 4, 1903.

Figure 1. Territories granted by the Republic of Colombia



Source: Geographical Institute Agustín Codazzi and Pinzón (2012)

Colombia has lived a sort of vicious circle in which governmental inaction and precarious territorial control has contributed to the rise and consolidation of illegal armed groups; they sometimes stand as parastatal organizations like insurgent groups and narco-traffickers. These groups' war for a monopoly of violence has concentrated the government's limited resources; this has complicated the State's territorial consolidation.

A frail government with low levels of governability and governance can hardly construct a coherent foreign policy in accordance with its resources and potentialities: "every state which has a war in its territory focuses part of its diplomacy on seeking foreign support to resolve its internal War" (González, Galeano & Trejos, 2015).

This has been the case of Colombia. Thanks to a long insurgent conflict and other factors, the country has been unable to draw up a foreign policy strategy. Therefore, the main distinctive mark of the Colombian approach has been its reactivity and the natural effort to lean toward American interests (Actis, 2014), trying to link those interests to Colombia's internal necessities including its fight against drug trafficking and later against groups of outlaws within the framework of a global war against terrorism after September 11, 2001.

Facing an eventual post-conflict process, Colombia must start a consolidation process of the State's control over its territory by means of the State's permanent solid presence, but not only using its security forces, but also its different institutions in accordance with the rule of law.

On the other hand, also in accordance with Colombia's post-conflict, the country must adapt and adjust its foreign policy not only in accordance with new internal realities but also with different regional settings. Therefore, the inclusion of strategic, yet relegated, zones within the country's policies like The Amazon and Darien must become a priority. Bethancourt and Simmonds comment that the geopolitical forgetfulness of the Colombian foreign policy regarding the Amazon and the Darien zones has caused an underutilization of natural and political potential in South America; this may be essential in times of transition towards a multipolar world in which regions will play an important role in the new global order" (2013, p. 346).

Historically, the Darien zone (the Colombia-Panama border) has had an important geopolitical value. Since the first decades, after the discovery of America, this zone quickly became a territory of disagreements and disputes among the European powers of those days, particularly Spain, England, France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Scotland. "it was an inhospitable territory considered one of the richest in biodiversity" (Cadena, 2009, p. 103).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the geopolitical importance of the Darien Zone to construct Colombia's future policy facing post-conflict. Therefore, the paper has the following structure. The first part contextualizes geopolitics in

Colombian regions. Then, the paper sketches some of the characteristics of the Colombian foreign policy regarding geopolitics. Then, it describes the Darien Zone geopolitically. Finally, the paper gives its conclusions and/or recommendations.

1. Colombia's geo-political regions

Celerier (1965) proposes that to understand the term territory based on geopolitics, the process must be done considering two types of factors: stable and variable. Among the stable factors, he considers space and its divisions. In other words, he considers space in as much as that it is inhabited, organized and divided at the same time. Among the variable factors, he considers people, natural resources and political structures to mention the most representative ones.

Regarding the stable factors, it must be assumed that Colombia is a state which borders with 11 countries. 5 of them¹ are land borders and 6 of them² are maritime. The country is divided into 32 provinces and 1.112 municipalities. From the 32 provinces, 12 border the seas and there are 47 municipalities on the coasts, 31 are on the Caribbean Sea and 16 on the Pacific Ocean (Avella, et al., 2009).

Regarding the variable factors, it is necessary to mention that the Western Region of the country is the most densely populated (it has the main urban centers). Precisely, the Western Region is a mountainous area, rich in mineral deposits and water supply. These factors have made its economic growth possible since colonial days.

Likewise, six geographical sub-regions are recognized in the country: The Caribbean, Pacific, Andean, Orinoco, Amazon and Insular regions. Each of these regions has different characteristics and potentialities (see figure 2). The "only country in South America that borders on two oceans is Colombia, and this has provided better geostrategic position" (Cadena, 2009, p. 103).

Colombia's political and economic power is found in the Andean region (Bahamón Dussan, 2012). It is grouped in a 400.000km² area, which has 75% of the country's population. Three-fourths of the country's population settle one third of the nation's territory, which is a situation that can lead to greater problems, especially when the government's capacity does not grow at the same rate as the population. This is the region where you find the cities of Bogota, the capital and

¹ Colombia's territories border on Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and Panama by land.

² Colombia borders on Costa Rica, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.

heartland of the country; Medellín the second economic center of the country and secondary heartland³.

In the Pacific Region and the Caribbean Sea, Colombia has the islands of Malpelo, and the archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, respectively. They are far from the country's continental coasts. For many years, San Andres archipelago was not very relevant for the State, yet it became important when Nicaragua took its territorial expansionist claims and pretensions to international courts. The Malpelo islands have relevance for the Colombian government in view of the country's interests in the Antarctic region based on Brazil's Frontage geopolitical theory⁴.

Colombia is merely an Amazon country in the geographical sense. This region has an incipient development not only because of its jungle characteristics, but also because the government has had very little interest in the region. This zone is:

the theater of operations for guerrilla fighters, drug traffickers and arms dealers who have understood how to combine airspace and land space, and who coexist profiting from the same business eventually including illegal mining exploitation. Furthermore, delinquents from all the Amazon countries participate in this juicy practice in the globalization of crime affecting the indigenous communities. (Bahamon Dusan, 2012, p. 90).

The geopolitical importance of this region is principally based on its rivers and existing treaties regarding free border navigation. Thanks to these treaties, trade is strengthened using waterways shared by Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Guiana and Suriname.

Colombia's Orinoco Region has a special interest regarding its importance in terms of agriculture, cattle, ranching, and forestry which come together with the government's interest in exploiting the oil present in this region. However, groups of outlaws have also concentrated their criminal activities there.

³ This was a statement made by serviceman, Augusto Bahamón, because he considers that "the city of Medellín has been a second National heart for Colombia and industrially, it is almost more important than the first" (Bahamón Dusan, 2012, p. 31).

⁴ The frontage theory points out that each South American country with extreme meridian's open to the pole in the Antarctic would have a sector corresponding to those meridians. The application of this theory would lead to political strategic tension because it would considerably reduce sectors claimed by Argentina and Chile (Sanchez, et.al.2005, p. 173)

Figure 2. Colombia's geographical regions



Source: Instituto Geografico Agustín Codazzi (IGAC) and Pinzón (2012)

The Pacific region is located between the Western Cordillera (mountain range) and the Pacific Ocean. Furthermore, it is one of the richest regions in natural resources, and at the same time, one of the most forgotten ones by the State. It covers an approximate area of 8,3170 square kilometers. The Pacific coast is 300 kilometers long from Punta Ardita on the Panamanian border down to the mouth of Río Mataje river on the Ecuadorian border. On this coastline, there is only one

large port, Buenaventura, and a medium capacity port at Tumaco, located on the far south of this coastline. Both ports have infrastructure constraints and an absence of suitable roads to communicate with the country's inland. This zone presents challenges for the country regarding foreign trade potential towards the Asian Pacific Agreement's zone.

On the other hand, the Caribbean region has a coastline on the Atlantic Ocean which is 1600 kilometers long stretching from Cocinetas Bay on the Venezuelan border up to Cabo Tiburon cape on the Panamanian border. It covers an area of 132,218km² in the north of the country. This region is characterized by large savannahs where farming activities related to rice growing and cattle ranching are popular. Cartagena, Santa Marta and Barranquilla are the main cities in this zone.

These last regions, precisely converge at the Darien region (see in figure 2 -red circle). It is important to highlight that the Colombian State has developed under a geopolitical conception of continental nature, and despite of what can be seen in figure 3, 45.86 % of the Colombian territory is maritime and has broad coastlines on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

2. Geopolitics in Colombian foreign policy

Historically, more precisely early in the last decade, and because of the intensification of the armed conflict and drug trafficking, Colombia has carried out a sort of reactive foreign policy lacking exterior objectives, centered on overcoming issues. Therefore, the country's foreign agenda has lacked a foreign policy strategy that includes geopolitical interests, taking advantage of strategic zones converging in the Colombian territory in accordance with external interests.

Regarding the importance that geopolitical aspects must have on the formulation of foreign policy, Haushofer pointed out that "for people and for the formation of states, situation, space and borders become essential starting points for foreign policy. Understand them based on geographic political knowledge. Each person can acquire knowledge and derive from it, sure principles to judge foreign policy needs (2012, p. 331).

In this respect," Colombia has privileged its relations with the United States, placing its foreign policy at the service of its internal policy in matters related to security policies and military strategies against irregular armed groups and drug traffickers" (Pastrana, 2010, p. 486). A clear example of this was the design of the so-called Colombia Plan, which was planned from the beginning of President

Andres Pastrana's Administration. The US government imposed the Plan as a condition for the country to receive support conceiving "a coherent plan to fight drug trafficking, and the Colombian government accepted it unconditionally" (Gonzalez, Galeano and Trejos, 2015, p. 51).

Figure 3. Colombian Maritime and terrestrial areas



Source: Colombian Ocean Commission (2012)

For the United States, it was a plan with geopolitical content but it was assumed as an internal public policy for Colombia where an international strategy was linked to the efforts for ending the country's internal armed conflict. This was called peace diplomacy: "the deliberate handling of a country's international

relations targeting at the specific objective of achieving external support to resolve an internal war” (Tokatlian, 1999, p. 341).

Peace diplomacy meant an important change in the way the internal armed conflict had been handled; before, the implications and the resolution of the armed conflict were not a part of the country’s international agenda. Traditionally, this issue was fundamentally addressed as a domestic policy and foreign intervention was considered as interference, not desired and little unhelpful” (Rojas, 2006).

From 2002 to 2010 (under President Alvaro Uribe’s governmental periods), Colombia conserved the essence of foreign policy to internationalize the armed conflict but not addressing peace diplomacy. Instead, the government resorted to an anti-terrorist diplomacy. This diplomacy aligned externally with the international crusade against terrorism because of the attacks on September 11, 2001 so it was internally linked to a public policy named “democratic security”.

Therefore, security immediately became the spinal column of Colombia’s foreign policy, on which decision-making transmuted and consolidated a process of “securitization” of foreign policy which had been started by President Andres Pastrana’s Administration.

By linking the Colombian armed conflict to the logic and dynamics of the war against terrorism, the country for the first time managed to link directly the United States encounter insurgent warfare. This was made in order to transmute the eminently anti-narcotic essence of the Colombia Plan into an anti-terrorist plan. Regarding this, the Colombia plan was incorporated and named Patriot Plan⁵, which up to date, has meant greater military deployment to the south of the country aiming at defeating the FARC in one of the zones where that group has the most influence. The execution of that Plan meant the presence of 800 U.S. troops and 600 US contractors. It is worth mentioning that, even if the conception of this Plan did not explicitly contain a geopolitical element, it was aimed at recovering zones having high strategic geopolitical value. Precisely, because of the State’s institutional inaction and weakness, these zones were easily occupied by criminal organizations acting as “parastates” in those territories.

⁵ 14,000 Official government troops in a geographical area of 241812 square kilometers and an estimated population of 1709976 inhabitants.

At the beginning of President Juan Manuel Santos' administration, people witnessed actions regarding foreign policies aimed at reinserting Colombia into the South American political dynamics. On one hand, the country could reestablish relations with neighbors and natural business partners like Venezuela and Ecuador (despite the existing ideological and political differences), leading to shades of a pragmatic foreign policy (Gonzalez, Mesa and Londoño, 2017, p. 284). On the other hand, the country strengthened relations with countries in the region like Chile, Peru, Panama, Costa Rica and Mexico. With this new focus, Colombia "seeks to open itself to the region and the world, instead of pretending that they are involved in Colombia's internal problems, like the previous president tried to do" (Ramirez, 2011, p. 79).

Despite of the change in the management of Colombian foreign affairs which shows a renewed country that plays a more active role in the region, this policy still lacks a coherent component of interests and geopolitical strategy that can allow the country to project itself.

It is necessary to mention the Colombian State's strategies regarding the Caribbean and the Pacific regions. The Caribbean strategy has surged as a reaction to a natural State policy regarding the International Court of Justice's decision in 2012. Prior to this date, national development plans and foreign policy guidelines did not develop a clear policy regarding this region. Concerning the Pacific, the strategy has been framed (in the last few years) within the so-called Pacific Alliance, highlighted by contradictions and the absence of a clear policy regarding the development in the Pacific coastline.

3. Geopolitical contextualization of the Darien region

This section presents a contextualization of the Darien region based on four general parameters: Territory, population, representations and external relations. Finally, a fifth parameter is introduced, which is related to regional issues according to the authors' criteria.

3.1 Territory

Since the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a territory has been considered one of the elements that constitutes a state. Nevertheless, beyond its conceptualization and its legal weight before international law, a territory represents a setting in which human beings interact.

Different authors, especially within realism and neorealism, have assigned an important role to territory within the elements that constitute national power. For instance, Morgenthau (1986, p. 143) gives the geographical and territorial aspect a relevant value when he considers it "the most stable factor on which a nation's power depends".

Most writers that concern themselves with the setting have had the tendency to underline the importance of such factors as determinants or at least as constraints of political behavior. The setting does not only limit human conduct, but it also offers opportunities. Climatic and Geographic factors are of special importance. The uneven distribution of resources as geographic and climatic endowment differences affects a state's potential power. The size of a country influences the availability of indigenous natural resources, and the weather affects the mobilization of necessary human resources to exploit those natural resources (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1993, p. 69).

In that case, the Darien Gap is a territory located on the Colombian - Panamanian border, and it is formed by the provinces of Antioquia and Choco on the Colombian side and on the Panamanian side, the province of Darien where there are indigenous settlements including " Kuna Yala, Madugandi, Wargandi, Embera-Wounaan, the districts of Chiman and the East of Chepo" (Orozco Cuello, Sanandres Campis and Molinares Guerrero, 2012, page 117).

The Colombian - Panamanian border, which some people have named with some legal basis, "the Forgotten border" (Poussa, 2004) is 266 kilometers long, and it was established by the Velez-Victoria treaty in 1924. The first article of the treaty stipulates that the borderline is demarcated as follows:

From Cabo Tiburon cape to the headwaters of Rio de la Miel river, along the mountain range by Gandi hill up to Sierra de Chugargun and Mali, going down the Nigue hills to Aspave heights, and from there to a point on the Pacific Ocean equidistant from Cocalito and Ardita.

In this sense, the treaty recognizes 14 boundary markers (Chancellery of the Republic of Colombia) (Colombian Geographical Society, 1982):

1. Northwest Point of Cape Tiburon Boundary marker: starting point of the border with the Caribbean side (8°41'7,3" N 77°21'50,9" O),
2. Cerro Medio Boundary marker: between Sapzurro Bay in Colombia, and la Miel Bay in Panama (8°40'45" N 7°21'28,1" O).

3. Sapzurro-La Miel Road Boundary marker: ($8^{\circ}41'17,7''$ N $77^{\circ}21'46,8''$ O).
4. Cerro Parado Boundary marker: between Quebrada Capurgana creek in Colombia and Rio de la Miel River in Panama ($8^{\circ}38'58,9''$ N $77^{\circ}21'30,7''$ O).
5. Cerro Sande Boundary marker: ($8^{\circ}39'8,4''$ N $77^{\circ}22'26,5''$ O)
6. Chucurtí Boundary marker: between Rio Armila river and Rio Acandí river ($8^{\circ}36'38,8''$ N $77^{\circ}23'44,2''$ O).
7. Empalme Boundary marker: the area from this boundary marker to boundary marker #1 forms the border between the Kuna Yala indigenous settlement in Panama and with the province Choco in Colombia ($8^{\circ}33'50''$ N $77^{\circ}26'03,4''$ O).
8. Cerro Gandi Boundary marker: ($8^{\circ}30'58,6''$ N $77^{\circ}27'1''$ O).
9. Tanela Boundary marker: ($8^{\circ}13'29,6''$ N $77^{\circ}17'33''$ O).
10. (Lemon Heights) Alto Limón Boundary marker: ($7^{\circ}58'17''$ N $77^{\circ}9'24,1''$ O), it is the most eastern place in Panama.
11. Palo de las Letras Boundary marker: ($7^{\circ}50'45,9''$ N $77^{\circ}20'40''$ O).
12. Mangle Boundary marker: between the eastern sides of the Rio Montorodo river (affluent of Rio Salaqui river) in Colombia and Rio Guayabo river (affluent of Rio Mangle river) in Panama ($7^{\circ}32'12,4''$ N $77^{\circ}35'39,8''$ O).
13. (the Crossing) Cruce Boundary marker: between the waters of Rio Juradó river and quebrada Balsitas creek, ($7^{\circ}28'25,5''$ N $77^{\circ}44'5,5''$ O).
14. Pacific Boundary marker: Located on a point on the Pacific Ocean coast, equidistant from Punta Cocalito point, in Panama, and Punta Ardita point in Colombia ($7^{\circ}12'39,3''$ N $77^{\circ}53'20,9''$ O).

This region is formed by a geographical system of swamps and mountains in which biophysical formations sharpen the territory. Three types of ecological regions are basically recognized: The coastal region composed by the Atlantic and Pacific Coast lines, which forms the most important area for human activity. It is a flat region with the most fertile soils and because of this, it is the most populated. The mountainous region is the least populated and the most endemic and biodiverse. In fact, this region has the largest area and occupies approximately 68% of the Darien Zone. It is important to highlight that there is

no precise information regarding the length of this region. Different state studies conducted by Panama and Colombia point to an approximate 16.000 km² area.

Different factors merge in this geographic area such the combinations of relief, moisture, closeness to the seas, abundant water sources and high solar luminosity; they make this region one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet.

The physical characteristics of the territory have made impossible road interconnection, so water routes are widely used. One of the infrastructure projects that links this region is the Pan-American Highway; its only missing part is precisely the Darien Gap. Several factors come together to accentuate this issue; the territory is undoubtedly one of the factors with the most significant weight. Nevertheless, concerning structure, we, the authors have decided to detail everything related to the Pan-American Highway in the section entitled issues at the end of this section.

3.2 Population

Just like the territory, population is one of the elements that forms a modern state. Population can be defined as "a group or a set of human nuclei located in a territory" (Pinochet, 1984, p. 161).

For Morgenthau (1886, p. 60), population is also one of the elements that grants states power, especially in the combination of the material items of a territory and human factors. This author states that it is necessary to distinguish between the population's qualitative and quantitative components to analyze pertinently national nature, national morality and diplomatic and government qualities concerning size, respectively.

In this section, we only concentrate on quantitative aspects and on some representative qualitative aspects like the population groups belonging to differentiated ethnic and racial groups and on the economic activities that these groups conduct.

In the Darien Zone, there are no cities, as we have stated above. There are indigenous districts and settlements. Nevertheless, it is relevant to know the main human settlements in the nearby areas or ecumene in this region. On the Panamanian side, the province of Darien is divided into two districts and 25 municipalities and the main townships are la Palma and el real de Santa Maria with an approximate population of 25.000 inhabitants. On the Colombian side,

you can find the towns of Acandí, Unguía, Juradó⁶ and Rio Sucio; they have a total approximate population of 55000 inhabitants. The only border towns are la Miel in Panama and Sapzurro in Colombia.

The people in the Darien Zone are mostly African descendants and indigenous. The indigenous groups that inhabit this region are Cuna-Tule and Embera-Katio Cholos bringing together an approximate population of 35.000 people.

The main economic activities in the Darien region "are based on the extraction of minerals and timber production; non-technical farming activities and survival activities including fishing and growing corn, rice, plantain, banana, yucca, yam, beans and Otoe" (Orozco Cuello, Sanandres Campis and Molinares Guerrero, 2012, p. 118). In the regions where topography allows it, people raise cattle and grow pastures. Alongside these activities, drug trafficking, smuggling and human trafficking are relevant in this region.

3.3 Representations

This section is especially related to a national feeling and identity. Even if for several international relations authors, national identity has a vast relevance in war dynamics, especially supporting the state's interests in these scenarios, here, we will approach national identity in relation to the people's feeling of belonging to a community; this is so because this region has not been immersed in a war between two states. In this sense, we will understand national identity as

the conscientiousness shared by members of a society regarding their integration and their belonging to a specific social community which has a determinate space-time reference framework which forges itself in a social environment and in specific historical circumstances (Baranoha, 2007, p. 13).

Factors like an absence of urban centers, of intercommunication roads, the isolation of a region from its respective countries and high population dispersion generate regional disintegration, constrain feelings of belonging to a specific nationality and generate loss of national identity.

⁶ "Law 191, 1995 established that the towns of Acandí, Unguía and Juradó have been declared border Zone. This means among other things that there should be government support for community development initiatives. Governors and mayors must be authorized to enter into agreements with neighboring countries to promote Community Development regulating colonization processes in the zones having special cultural and environmental characteristics, and to guarantee its inhabitants the right to education" (ombudsman, 2017, p. 88).

Because of the growth of the Colombian armed conflict, drug trafficking and the growing phenomenon of migrants from other countries using this geographical space as an illegal transit zone to go to the United States, Colombia and Panama have experienced common issues which do not transcend to the point of weakening bilateral relations. On the contrary, relations are reinforced aiming at mutually combating these criminal phenomena.

It is worth highlighting that the presence of State on the Colombian Panamanian border crosses in the Darien region, in the case of both countries, is limited only to the presence and control by members of military forces and that there was no direct representation of any Colombian or Panamanian Diplomatic Corps and other bodies of Ministries of Foreign Affairs (like Migration) in this region.

3.5 Issues

The Colombian armed conflict, illicit arm trafficking, criminal gangs, drug trafficking and illegal migration have become the main issues in this region identified by the National Development Plan (2010, p. 694). The absence of the States on both sides of the border, besides the geographic conditions mentioned above, have made it possible for illegal activities to flourish and endure accentuating the precarious inhabitability situation of this zone.

For Possua (2004), there has been an overflow of the Colombian armed conflict towards Panama. International crisis group's (2004) (2005) reports indicate that in the region, there were members of the FARC Guerrilla group, along with a rebel militia group named Bloque Ivan Rios and paramilitary groups stipulating that the Panamanian border is a "heaven" for criminal organizations, and they consider that the strategic position in this zone makes it an ideal corridor for drug trafficking and arm trafficking.

After the demobilization of paramilitary groups in 2006, the Darien Zone (next to the Urabá Gulf) in Colombia has experienced an increase of the conflict phenomenon caused by criminal gangs that dispute the territory for drug trafficking. Among these gangs, the most relevant is the so-called "Cartel del Golfo" along with a group named "Autodefensas Gaitanistas".

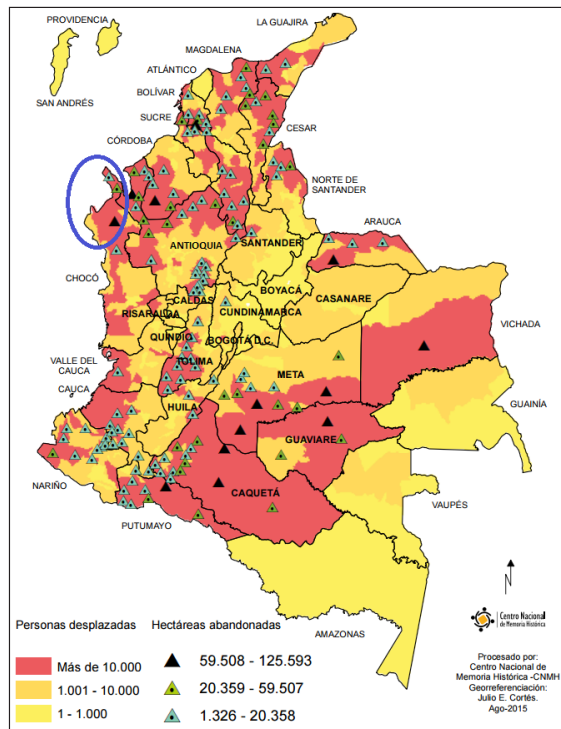
In today's post-conflict scenario, the FARC will be located in the *Transitory Countryside Normalization Zones* ⁷; one of them is near the Darien region in the

⁷ The government of Colombia and the FARC - EP guerrilla agreed to create 20 free Countryside normalization zones (element of Colombia & FARC - EP guerrilla, 2016, p. 61) so that they may serve as concentration points for guerilla troops during the process of economic political social reintegration into civilian life and will also be used for the compliance and the verification of the ceasefire and as a starting point for the process handing over their weapons.

municipalities of Riosucio and Vigía del Fuerte. These spaces have been thought or designed to lodge guerrilla fighters who have joined the peace agreement; they are spaces for their transition towards the civilian life.

On the other hand, the region has experienced a two-way migration phenomenon. One is *in – out*; it is characterized by the inhabitants' forced displacement caused by the presence of illegal armed groups fighting over the zone. The other is *out – in*; it is characterized by the presence of many migrants from other parts of the world using the zone as a transit space towards Central America and the United States.

Figure 5. Displaced people and hectares of land forcefully abandoned in Colombia



Source: National Center for Historical Memory (2015)

In the first case, as you can see in figure 5, there is a big issue at the Panamanian border zone related to forced expropriation of more than 10,000 hectares of land. Likewise, there is also a big issue regarding forced displacement which may reach about 200,000 people.

In the second case, ACNUR and the Ombudsman (2017) have identified four routes for the illegal transit of migrants: Turbo-la Miel- Puerto Obaldía, Turbo-Cacarica-Panamá, Turbo-Capurganá-Panamá and Bahía Solano-Juradó- Panamá. These routes can be seen in figure 5. This phenomenon evidences illegal migrants coming principally from Cuba, Haiti, Nepal, Bangladesh, India and Somalia who are trying to get to Central America and North America from Colombia.

Figure 6. Illegal migration routes in the Darien region.



Source: Drawn up by the researchers using data taken from the Ombudsman (2017) and Google Maps, Google Earth (2016)

Another of this region's issues is reflected on the difficulties regarding access routes. Since 1880, there have been projects to communicate Colombia and Panama and contribute to the American connection. In the first stage, a Pan American railroad was proposed, precisely because of the rise of this means of communication at that time. Afterwards, the idea of a highway became relevant in the V International American Conference held in Santiago de Chile in 1923. Figure 7 shows the projection of the Pan-American Highway and the missing section at the Darien Gap.

Figure 7. Pan-American Highway in the Darien region



Source: Pan-American Road Congress (1991)

In 1957, the government of Colombia made an agreement with the government of the United States regarding the routes to build the Pan-American Highway in the Darien region (Rodríguez Acero, 2008).

The initial advice of the Darien subcommittee recommended the following route for the highway in the Colombian territory back in 1958:

Aspave - basin on the Nercua river. It goes Downstream until it joins the Truando river. There it goes Upstream to the Basin of the Cupica river. From there, it goes south to Limones Bay. Then, it goes along the Pacific coast seen near Nabuga Bay. Then, it continues South to Puerto Mutis in Solano Bay. Then it continues South to cross Valle river down to the mouth of Nimiquia Creek follow the right bank of Boroboro river to the river basin. Heading in a sensibly Southeast Direction, look for Rio Baudo river approximately at the height of Puerto Yacup, keep going

to reach the road that is in service between Istmina and Youto, on the Isthmus of San Pablo. From there, frankly go towards the east to look for La Virginia - pueblo Rico - Tado road under construction. From the Pan-American Highway at the Basin of Cauca river, it is included Colombian government's program connected to industrial, agricultural, political or economic interest centers (Bateman, 1961).

The Pan-American Highway crosses the American continent, and it is approximately 48.000 kilometers; 87 kilometers are interrupted in the section corresponding to the Darien Gap and despite Panamanian and Colombian initiatives, the end of that section of the road is still a Utopia.

4. Conclusions

It is undeniable that a good part of the Colombian State's foreign policy has been focused on efforts to terminate the armed conflict, either using military forces or through peace talks. Colombia's diplomatic efforts have been focused on this aspect neglecting other aspects of vital importance for the State. Therefore, it can be said that in an eventual post-conflict scenario, the state can concentrate on all those other works it neglected including assuring the national territory's sovereignty. In view of the above consideration, the Darien region has an important relevance for Colombian interests.

This region's potential depends on the use and the purpose that the state has for the region because, regardless of how strategic a geographic position is, the geopolitical interest depends on the value a region is given. Therefore, Colombia could take advantage of this region in terms of exploiting natural resources, tourism and, as the region is connected to the dynamics of the country, as an important point in logistics matters for international trade. It is worth highlighting that in the framework of the program named "Turismo Paz y Coexistencia" (Tourism, Peace and Coexistence), the Uraba- Darien region is one of the regions considered as a focus of development for the country and as one of the 12 corridors that will be created in the 32 provinces.

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