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The increase in military expenses is part of the policy of democratic security and represents five percent of the national budget.

Defense and security spending: subject of many debates

Defense and security spending has been the center of frequent debates as to its usefulness, importance and impact. Is it really a priority? And is it sustainable and sufficient? Does it replace social spending? These are only some of the questions being addressed in this discussion.

On January 1, 2007 a new tax was applied—one which is destined to continue until 2010. It is a tax on patrimony and is called “the war tax,” by means of which the government plans to collect 8.6 billion pesos to fortify and modernize the Armed Forces.

“This money will enable us to maintain over time the success that we have obtained thanks to the Policy of Democratic Security,” says the Defense Minister (Secretary of Defense), Juan Manuel Santos. This tax was approved last December, the same month that the first three Super-tucano fighter planes arrived in Colombia, out of the twenty-five which the country has acquired from a Brazilian manufacturer to reinforce the Colombian Air Force. In addition, the National Development Plan 2007-2010 increased the investment in defense from 3.2 billion pesos in the previous four-year period to 8.8 billion.

These decisions, made in the context of the government’s policy of democratic security, along with spending on defense and security, have been the subject of both praise and criticism and have frequently been debated.

Defense and security spending is defended or criticized in accordance with one of two main tendencies. The first of these considers such spending to be fundamental, since it strengthens the armed forces, and if the country’s security forces improve, then there will be a greater chance of achieving peace. Others, however, consider that defense spending is unproductive; instead of improving social conditions, it restricts resources available for investing in areas of greater social impact.

Defense spending includes such matters as investment in (and the financing of) the Military and the Police force, and in general includes public entitlements and establishments related to this sector of the economy, such as the Military Forces Pension Fund and the Military Hospital, as well as the Indumil, among others. Most of this expenditure is earmarked for day-to-day functioning of the defense system, says Andrés Dávila, Director of Justice and Security at the National Planning Department (DNP). In 2006, working expenditure rose to approximately 12,000 million pesos and investment costs ran to 1,400 million. Defense spending has been steadily growing, reaching peaks



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Last December, Colombia received the first Supertucano planes from a Brazilian company.

in 1997, 2001 and 2003, according to statistics from the Ministry of Defense (Table 1).

A priority expense?

The Andrés Pastrana government (1998-2002) and the first administration of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2006) recorded the greatest increases in defense and security expenditure. But since the nineties, this spending has been on the increase. Bearing in mind that the budget for the defense sector, including resources provided by United States cooperation, the increase between 2003 and 2006 is slightly more than two billion dollars (Table 2).

According to Fundación Seguridad y Democracia (Foundation for Security and Democracy), since 1990 there has been an increase in this spending thanks to the implementation of activities to contain the guerrillas, the addition of recruits for the armed forces and the police, and a rise in salaries. In 1994, the question of security and defense was treated explicitly for the first time in development plans and their corresponding budgets, according to César Restrepo of the above-mentioned foundation.

The Pastrana Administration, says Restrepo, undertook the most important process of strengthening, modernizing and reconstructing the Military Forces, especially through the military component of Plan Colombia which served primarily to professionalize the military, as well as to make advances in improved technology and in the areas of training and intelligence. Subsequently, in the first term of President Uribe, with the implementation of Plan Patriota and the enhanced offensive against

the FARC guerrillas, the "democratic security tax" was introduced and collected some 2.5 billion pesos. These funds were used to augment the number of operatives and to create new units such as battalions and mobile brigades, according to a study made by the Foundation on Security and Defense in Colombia entitled "From Containment to Offensive Action."

Although both the opponents and the defenders of defense and security spending agree that national security is a fundamental public good and one which the government has the duty to guarantee, discrepancies exist as to how this should be achieved and as to whether or not it is an expenditure that should take priority over other equally urgent needs. "Defense is a public concern and security is a concern of vital national interest which no country has neglected. Military expenditure, which has grown as the population's demand for security has increased, should not be underestimated, much less in Colombia, a country which has to face so many threats," says retired general Manuel José Bonnett.

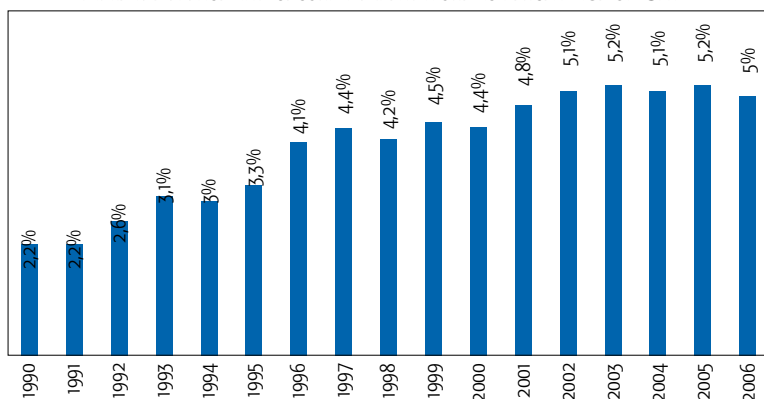
Choosing between the military and the social

A 2004 study carried out by the National Planning Department entitled "Defense and Security Expenditure: A Characterization of the Colombian Case in an International Context" states that "the fact of maintaining a large military capacity does not imply that the State has adopted a war-like attitude, given that the said capacity may be the fruit of a decision to maintain a dissuasive power which is proportional to the magnitude, the probability and the imminence of a particular threat as it is perceived."

Nonetheless, the same document points out that maintaining a high level of defense and security expenditure is not necessarily synonymous with a large military capacity: "Any government is likely to make a great economic effort regarding this expenditure without it necessarily becoming really efficient or efficacious." The important thing, says Dávila, is not simply to spend more on military or on social concerns, but that such spending meets the needs of the population, such as the right to life and the right to governability. "Until we have recovered or consolidated these elemental conditions, there is no point in increasing the budget on health and education."

However, Alvaro Camacho, a specialist at Los Andes University, while recognizing that security is a fundamental public good and that it is the government's duty to guarantee it, says that we should ask the question:

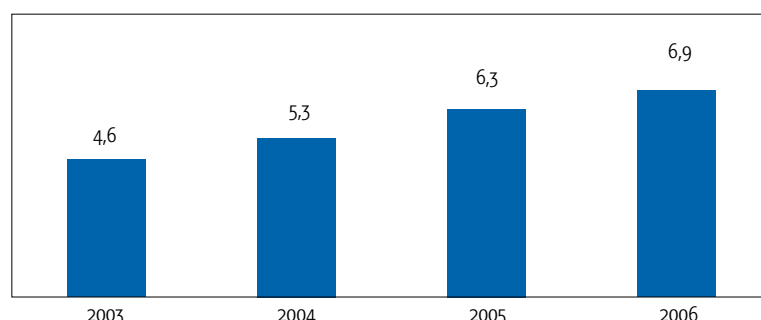
TABLE 1. DEFENSE AND SECURITY EXPENDITURE AS PERCENTAGE OF GNP



Source: Ministry of Defense.

Includes Armed Forces, police, general management, public entitlements and establishments related to the sector

TABLE 2. BUDGET FOR THE DEFENSE SECTOR 2003-2005. INCLUDES COOPERATION RESOURCES FROM THE UNITED STATES TWO BILLION DOLLARS



Source: Ministry of Defense.

Includes resources from United States cooperation, patrimony tax and normal budget

Do more arms mean greater security? For him the answer is no. For years, he argues, people have been insisting on the need for more military spending, considering it a priority, yet at the same time there has existed an enormous increase in the number of guerrilla and paramilitary forces.

Added to this argument is one put forward by social organizations: namely, that military spending is reducing vital funding for social concerns, and that instead of investing more money in weapons, more investment should be made in addressing the situation of those members of the population with low incomes, many of whom are indigent.

Restrepo, of the Foundation for Security and Democracy, insists that defense spending does not reduce resources that could be used for the social sector. "This is not perverse, it is necessary. They are dependent variables. Thus, for example, it would not be possible to carry out works of infrastructure in areas where there was a strong presence of armed groups operating outside the law".

Bonnet does not agree that defense expenditure is reducing social resources, since social spending occupies the highest expenditure in the budget. Camacho believes that spending on defense and security has excluded social spending. Which is why he asks: What is the best way to develop socially? Through security or through peace? "We should examine to what extent projected spending on military matters is really adequate for solving a conflict," he says. Additionally, Camacho points out that defense and security expenditures should have priority, since armed confrontation is not the only way to overcome the problem of conflict. "Although we cannot deny that it is an important component, it is not the only mechanism nor the most appropriate one for solving the conflict."

Andrés Dávila disagrees. Military spending, for him, is essentially a social expenditure, since it is indispensable that the government guarantees the right to life and conditions of governability. To that extent, he insists, this is a function that is first and foremost carried out by the use of public force. "Spending on defense and security," he says, "also brings benefits to society in the short, medium, and long term, by means of direct employment, for example, in the defense sector, among others."

Sufficient and sustainable?

The debate on defense and security spending has another important ingredient: namely, the question about whether the effort Colombia is making in this area is sufficient and, moreover, is it sustainable?

Dávila argues that, for the government, the expenditure is insufficient, and this is demonstrated not only by its introducing the tax on patrimony, but also by its employing extraordinary resources which society has shown itself willing to pay because it has perceived the benefits of security. Former commander Bonett also insists that the huge threats faced by Colombia demand a greater investment in military matters.

For Camacho, on the contrary, the defense expenditure is excessive in comparison with the results obtained. "The logic of the situation is as follows: given that it isn't working, let's do more." And as a result the government invests where it ought not to invest.

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For the government, increasing the budget for security and defense is important to achieve its short and long term goals.

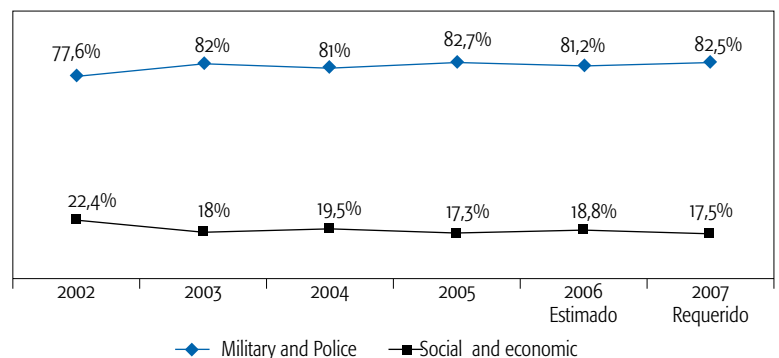
Another subject of debate is the sustainability of this expenditure, and especially the proportion of United States aid. According to Ministry of Defense statistics, U.S. cooperation in the defense sector rose from 314.3 million dollars in the budget for the year 2000 to 496 million in 2006.

In the United States itself there are those who question the fact that the aid is primarily military and not social. The Center for International Policy founded after the Vietnam war by former diplomats and activists for peace, and which promotes a U.S. foreign policy based on international cooperation, demilitarization and respect for basic human rights, carried out a study that revealed this difference (Table 3).

Recent governments have recognized the importance of U.S. military aid. For Dávila "sustainability depends on political will, the perception a society has of the benefits it receives in order to know whether or not it is prepared to pay more, and also on the permanence over time of U.S. military aid, which is considerable."

The sustainability of defense and security spending, whether or not it has been sufficient, and whether it has produced perceptible benefits for the Colombian people are subjects which are once again on the national agenda in the light of weapons acquisitions and a tax on patrimony (the so-called "war tax") which Colombians are paying for the first time this year. Discussions continue, as yet unresolved, about which path truly leads to human development, security and peace. And people are also asking how to offer the population security in a permanent and integral fashion without minimizing the importance of social conditions. ▀

TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL AID OF THE UNITED STATES TO COLOMBIA



Source: Center for International Policy