THE UNITED STATES 1989
MILITARY INTERVENTION IN PANAMA

Adrian Mihai DIACONU
adriandiaconu76@yahoo.com
Military Technical Academy, Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT
The Cold War represented an-all level confrontation for influence extension across the world. The military intervention issue brings about heated debates among military analysts regarding employment of foreign forces to ensure global security especially in the current context in which states cope with various risks and threats to both national and international security systems. The analysis of the military intervention in Panama from 1989 might set a standard for the states, the military political-alliances as well as the designated international bodies in charge of ensuring collective security with the view to identifying the most effective ways that would prevent military conflict. Lately, at global level, military intervention has mainly turned into a rapid way that might solve international differences. Lately, one resorts to the lessons learned during the Cold War military interventions. The designated staff for the military political decisions at strategic level must assess various types of threats, and eventually find the most appropriate stance for the armed forces.

KEYWORDS: international crisis, military intervention, armed conflict, lessons learned.

1. The United States 1989 Military Intervention in Panama
Placed between the two American continents, Panama represents a region of great interest. The idea of constructing a channel that links the two oceans first appeared in 1534, on the initiative of king Charles V. of Spain. In 1850 Great Britain and the USA negotiated the Clayton-Buñier treaty through which they gave their consent that neither one could hold exclusive control over a canal and also neither one could settle a part of Central America [1].

After finishing the Suez canal in 1869, Vicente Ferdinand Lesseps started working on the project for the Panama Canal. On 1st January 1880, the construction of the canal starts under the supervision of Ferdinand de Lesseps, but after 13 years of work, the French company that initiated the building process went bankrupt due to high costs caused by landslides and the great number of victims, estimated at around 25000 men, main causes of death being malaria and yellow fever [2].
In 1901 the former treaty was replaced by the Hay-Pauncefote treaty that restated the principles of neutrality and free use but removed the limits imposed on the former treaty and the USA began negotiation for acquiring a territory in Panama [3].

The Colombian Parliament refused in 1903 to give a territory to the USA, and because of this president T. Roosevelt sent in a US “Nashville” Battleship and following an uprising in Panama a Puppet Government was installed and the first treaty regarding the Panama Canal called the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty was signed in 18 November 1903 [4]. This treaty designated an USA administrated area on both shores of the water course and legalised US military interventions.

On the 23rd of February 1904, the new Panamanian authorities leased to the US the occupation and control of the interoceanic canal region in exchange of 10000000 USD and a yearly pay of 250000 USD (later increased to 430000 USD after the US currency drop in 1933) [5].

In 1914 the canal was finished with the help of US soldiers, the opening ceremony being held on the 15th of August 1914 by the passing of the “SS Ancon” [6].

2. Causes and Geopolitical and Geostrategic Context of the Intervention

In 1968 “a coup d’etat” by the National Guard imposed military control over the government. In spite of a democratization impression the control of the state remained in the hands of the commander of the defence forces in Panama.

The coup brought General Omaar Torrijos Herrera to power, who later passed leadership to Aristides Royos government who in 1978 was elected president for a period of 6 years. Torrijos Herrera remained the leader of the National Guard and the true holder of power until 1981 when he died because of a flight accident.

Manuel Antonio Noriega Morena, former chief of the military intelligence services, took command of the government in 1983 and transformend the National Guard into a powerful national military organisation, capable of defending the national territory and aiding the US in the defense of the canal. The transformation of the Panamanian armed forces was made with the aid of the USA. The increased power of National Defense Power evolved gradually into a situation that was not in accordance with the US interests and the Panamanian people who accused the US for aiding the army in strengthening their political control.

Tensions between the USA and Panama culminated in the civil crusade that began in 1987 when the former Commander of the Major Staff of the NDP, colonel Diaz-Herreta, was forced to quit his position and declared that the chief of state was involved in narcotics smuggling, money laundering for drug cartels and ordered the execution of Hugo Spadafora, a strong criticizer of M.A. Noriega’s politics [7].

This started public protest against M.A. Noriega and represented the spark that started the Civil National Crusade (CNC), an organisation opossed to Noriega. Thousands of Panamanian people participated in street manifestations and marches asking for Noriega’s resignation and the NDP answered with great brutality.

On the 26th of June 1987 the US Senate approved a resolution through which it requested the instauration of democracy in the state of Panama. The Panamanian governemnt responded by organising a demonstration in front of the US Embassy and with the taking into custody of the diplomatic and military US personnel. Immediately the United States of America suspended all economic assistance to Panama and the deputy of the secretary of defence Richard Armitage received the task of elaborating a plan to dispose of Noriega [8].

In February 1988 Noriega was put under accusation from a US jury for narcotics smuggling and money laundering.
The Panamanian president Eric Arturo Devalle Henriquez announced that he is replacing Noriega in the command position of the PDF but the General Assembly of Panama unseated Devalle and designated Manuel Solis-Palma as president who was one of Noriega’s henchmen.

The US announced its support for Devalle in his effort to reestablish democracy. On the first of March president Devalle emitted a proclamation in which he ordered that all payments made to the state of Panama be made directly to the Delvalle government. The Panamanian ambassador in the US requested banks to freeze Panamanian accounts. Also Devalle requested that the payments mentioned in the Panama Canal treaty be made into an account in the US.

On March 11 president Ronald Reagan announced the suspension of prefferential trade with Panama, pledging the funds owed to Panama and some funds owed according to the Panama Canal treaty signed in 1977 and asked the governmental institutions of the US to intensify actions against drug traffic and money laundering in Panama.

These actions lead to great economic problems followed by a number of strikes in Panama. Noriega stopped with brutality these strikes but also a “coup d’état” led by NDP officers in March after wich and emergency state was declared and control was taken away from all governmental functions.

In April the US announced new restrictions regarding bank account transfers in Panama. Noriega called upon his allies for help, Libya gave 24 million dollars and Mexico offered Panama oil at very low cost.

In April 1988 the US initiate negotiations with Noriega regarding dropping charges related to drug traffic but these became public and generated street manifestations in the USA.

In May 1989 in Panama elections took place and the percentage of votes was 3 to one against Noriega but the later canceled the elections and named one of his own men president and because of that the USA reacted by removing the US ambassador from Panama and supplementing US military troops in the area [9].

American troops stationed in the area of the canal were supplemented first in the spring of 1988 and after that in May 1989. The total number of troops reached 13000 compared to the total number of Panamanian soldiers which was 16000. The Panamanian army was mainly equipped with Soviet weapons delivered from Nicaragua. Preoccupied with strenghtening his armed forces, Noriega obtained new loans from Libya and Taiwan given the fact that Cuba refused to suport him in May 1989 [10].

The USA tried isolating Panama at international level and started negotiations with the Organisation of American States in order to put even greater pressure on Noriega. Negotiations failed and subsequently the US proceeded to a secret plan that implied supporting the opposition and attempting a “coup d’etat” but this plan failed as well. In November 1989 it was decided that the only remaining option to remove Noriega from power was a military intervention.

At the high level meeting in Malta on 2nd and 3rd December, George Bush asks M. Gorbaciov to accelerate his disengagement in Latin America so that the military intervention could take place.

3. Political and Military Events

On the 20th December, after seventeen days since the meeting in Malta at 1 a. m. operation “Just Cause” is put in motion against the political regime in Panama. This action is considered to be the most important intervention of the US military after the Vietnam War and the first airborne operation of such scale after the landing in Normandy [11].

Addressing the American population, president George Bush explained the reasons behind the intervention, the first for protecting the 35000 American citizens on
Panamanian territory (one American soldier was killed and another one aggressed violently along with his wife), for putting Noriega on trial in the USA for traffic with narcotics, for reinstalling a democratic régime in Panama and legally speaking the operation had at its basis the rights of the USA over the canal according to the treaty signed in 1977.

Defensive troops in Panama numbered around 5000 soldiers and paramilitary forces had 8000 soldiers grouped within “Dignity Battalions”.

The US forces were formed out of 13000 American soldiers stationed permanently in Panama or in training at a war school near Colon, reinforced with 9500 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division, three desant battalions, on battalion from the 7th Infantry Division and the 16th Military Police Brigade.

Alongside normal troops the special forces of the land troops, the pilots from Task Force 160, Navy Seals and approximately 300 military planes took part in the operation [12].

For conducting the operation, the US split Panama in three regions distributed to four units with the following codenames designated Bayonet, Red, Atlantic and Semper Fidelis the most fierce battles being fought by the first two.

The military actions were started in Task Force Red when at midnight, the plane that was carrying the rangers and paratroopers landed on the Omar-Torrijos airport. The first to open fire were the rangers, who made contact with their opponents immediately after landing, having as an immediate objective to occupy the airport and adjacent landing strips so that the C-141 Starlifters B of the 82nd Division could land. Fighting was intense in the first phase but the Panamanian resistance was defeated by the rangers who disposed of highly modern weapons on board a C-130 equipped for special operations [13].

The 82nd Division aircraft started to land every 10 seconds; once the landing runway occupied, 20 C-14/5 airborne carriers landed having on board another two battalions of the Task Force Pacific division. The new troops engaged in combat left the airport at once and gained ground on the bridges over the Pacora River, thereby cutting off Panama City in the East.

In order to increase the impact force of the ground attacks, supplementary M 551 Sheridan light tanks were cast and proved to be effective in fighting an opponent scarcely armed with heavy antitank armament.

After cleaning the terrain of isolated resistance nests the American soldiers fought their way supporting Task Force Bayonet, that was already deployed in Panama City. In a short period of time elements from the 82nd Airborne Division and 7th Infantry Division (Task Force Atlantic) took hold of a great number of key installations from Panama, including the Madden Dam and the Sierra Tigre electric plant, defending at the same time the US military camps at Colon [14].

Isolated fighting with Noriega’s Dignity Battalions continued for several weeks in Panama City. American Special Forces carried out over 40 operations in Panama with the purpose of capturing Noriega, but these missions failed each time. The most difficult of these actions focused on Noriega’s central commandment in the center of Panama City. Harsh fighting took also place at Fort Amadro and Rio Hato in the west of the country.

An important role in “Operation Just Cause” was played by the American soldiers, American citizens being able to see on television how a group of soldiers would play rock music on large speakers oriented to the Vatican Embassy where Noriega was hiding, showing also the psychological aspect of warfare. The siege continued until Manuel Noriega could not resist any longer and surrendered.

Planning and preparing the psychological operations contingent for the hostilities in Panama started many years before “Operation
Just Cause”. Audio cassettes, sent messages, relevant subjects or symbols that were printed show that psyops materials were prepared early.

During the fighting the role of the soldiers designated with psychological operations was well recognised on many occasions. First Battalion from the 508th Airborne Brigade had the task of defending Fort Amador, a military complex used both by Americans and Panamanians. Due to the intensification of security operations, American resident could not be evacuated until the attack began and so wishing to reduce casualties among the enemy troops, made the “Speaker” team the main element of the operation. The battalion isolated the area that belonged to the Panamanians, and at night, the intervention forces occupied battle positions. The opponents were warned that resisting is useless against the fire power of the intervention forces, power manifestations being brought about on this purpose by gradually using the American arsenal starting from small weapons up to the 105 mm cannons. The repeated messages had effect on the Panamanian soldiers who surrendered, the entire operation ending with minimal casualties and Fort Amador being secured [15].

American marine infantry encountered opposition from members of the Panamanian army at La Chorrera, a village situated near the edge of Panama City and the Howard air base. After firing ceased the “Speaker” team started broadcasting messages that asked the enemy to surrender and spread free passage passes. The resistance ended the next morning without casualties.

Alongside audio actions, psychological influencing activities were also spreading fliers and free passage passes, radio and Television broadcast, search Posters, and announces that urged Panamanian soldiers to drop their weapons in order to receive an amount of money.

Two initiatives were launched to help keeping the Panamanian population informed one with a Spanish newspaper and the other by TV and radio broadcasts made by the “Volant Solo” airplane [16].

Radio and TV transmissions broadcasted in Spanish helped informing the panamanese population regarding the intentions of the American intervention forces and sending advice about how to avoid casualties of civilians. This effort was praised as being a leading factor in reducing civilian casualties.

Until the 8th of January 1990, the intervention forces produced and spread over a million manifests, 50000 posters, 55000 newspapers and 125000 other printed materials. Alongside broadcasts from “Volante Sollo” mobile radio stations of the psychological operations operated 24h/day [17].

Psychological influencing operations proved to be a power multiplier due to their role played alongside conventional units and proved to be effective in reducing casualties and controlling the local population.

Early implementation of psychological influencing operations helped asuring the overall success of the operation.

4. Consequences of the Military Intervention

“Just Cause” represented a military succes as it marked a turning point in modern warfare proving clearly that joint conventional and special forces were very useful for the overall operation. From a military point of view this intervention showed that proper training and equipment make night actions more effective and valuable in some cases rather than day time operations. Operation “Just Cause” proved that respecting the values of armed combat: surprise, offensive and unity of actions asures success in combat.

The USA Army planned and carried out a complex operation, the succes of the intervention being owned to good knowledge of the designated targets because of the presence of US forces in Panama before the conflict.
Operation “Just Cause” was a demonstration of intervention troops. USA land forces hit simultaneously 27 targets acting from 4 different bases all with the support of their air force. The military operation stood out positively because of the good collaboration between the US units already dispatched to Panama with the units brought in at the beginning of the intervention. During the development of the intervention there have been some records that testify cases of underestimating the Panamanian defenders, not anticipating the thefts of the Panamanian army and civil population, the failure of capturing Noriega and also a case of casualties caused by mishandling of a F-117A [18].

These small disfunctionalities did not affect the overall development of the intervention, the number of casualties being very low compared to the total number of dislocated US troops: 23 soldiers, 3 civilians died and a number of 314 got injured, Panamanians lost 314 soldiers 157 were wounded 202 civilians died and the number of civilians injured hasn’t been determined clearly [19].

On 3rd January 1990 Noriega surrendered in front of the US forces. The operation took longer and was more deadly than expected. The inhabitants of Panama paid a heavy tribute. The international press condemned the brutal behavior of American paratroopers forming the 82nd Airborne Division.

Noriega was sent to justice and the Panamanian army was disbanded and the country was engulfed by disorder because of an economic crisis. Police forces had a hard time coping with resolving the post conflict crisis.

This intervention was the first oriented directly against the leader of a state, a reason why it was harshly criticized in Latin America and within the Organization of American States. With the exception of Spain and France which regretted the intervention, most European countries were not concerned with the intervention.

The attention of Europe was caught by other groundbreaking news that concerned a presumed mass genocide in Romania a country that would give up communism definitely.

The USA intervention in Panama isn’t considered an international crisis of wide scope. Political analysts considered this intervention to be an action made by Washington to keep order in its geopolitical and geostrategic area of interest.

From a historical point of view the invasion is seen as an act of major force of a superpower that used a disproportionate military force to solve an international conflict that could have been solved through diplomatic means.

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