

Andean Abyss: The Chess Player of Cali

[Cali cartel co-founder Gilberto Rodriguez] became known as the “Chess Player” for his ruthless and calculating approach to the drug business. ... The Rodriguez brothers ... controlled Cali in the way that feudal barons once ruled medieval estates. ... Buy Colombia, rather than terrorize it, became their guiding philosophy. ... The cartel built dozens of high-rise offices and apartment buildings as a way of laundering their money. The Cali skyline changed, and thousands of jobs were created. Their money permeated the city’s economy, and the natives became addicted to laundered cash and conspicuous consumption.

– Ron Chepesiuk, *Drug Lords—The Rise and Fall of the Cali Cartel*.

Here’s a look at Colombian drug cartels as depicted in *Andean Abyss*. While the illegal drug industry does not care about legitimacy, it is an insurgency nevertheless. By definitions laid out by National War College scholar Bard O’Neill, the Cartels are “commercialist” insurgent groups—contesting political power purely to aid their acquisition of material resources (*Insurgency & Terrorism*, p28).



Cali skyline (photo by David Alejandro Rendón)

In the game, the Cartels faction wins not through popular support or opposition but by building its criminal organization (expanding its bases) and amassing resources. But its presence can get in the way of other factions’ objectives of territorial control and political support. The Cartels, for example, start the game within one rally action of controlling Cali, which begins politically neutral rather than supportive of the Government.



Andean Abyss on Vassal. Colombia, mid-1990s—Cali’s cartel contests the city’s loyalty. Will the Government (blue) strike at the Cartels (green) in their urban stronghold, or live and let live and just garner the citizens’ support through civic action?

War of Weeds

As a result of the dismantling of the drug cartels, trafficking has experienced radical changes in structure. ... There are [now] between 250 and 300 trafficking organizations in Colombia. Their leaders are some of the former cartels’ second-rank members ... The new organizations are smaller, closed, and secret ... [They] have developed strategies, methods and techniques aimed at making the business more dynamic, sneaking away from law enforcement and blending in better in their respective regions.

– Álvaro Camacho and Andrés López, “From Smugglers to Drug Lords to *Traquetos*—Changes in Illicit Colombian Drug Organizations,” 2007.

The historical period of game—mid-1990s to mid-2000s—saw the sunset of Colombia’s flashy, politically active drug cartels, but not of the illicit drug industry that the game’s Cartels faction represents. And so, in *Andean Abyss*, the Cartels can reconstitute themselves, able to slip readily out of areas of danger and regrow elsewhere.

Unlike the other factions, the Cartels can recruit forces anywhere: battalions of hired guns—*sicarios*—await among the poor. But the Cartels’ guerrilla force pool is the smallest—it cannot organize campaigns on the scale of the more military FARC or AUC—and the Cartels do not have the other insurgents’ potent battle tactics.

The Cartels faction needs lots of bases to win (they represent not only coca and poppy fields but also processing labs and distribution routes). It will find it hard to protect its bases with the smaller number of Cartels guerrillas, and rural Cartels bases are vulnerable to aerial spraying (the Government’s eradication action). But the Cartels also can place new bases faster than any other faction, immediately though special cultivation actions or with delay but cheaply through processing actions to ready drug shipments. Shipment markers represent major caches of processed cocaine or heroin awaiting delivery to market outside Colombia—they are vulnerable to seizure by the other factions (any insurgent faction can liquidate them to accelerate operation). But if defended and held long enough to get to market (via a card-triggered end phase), they yield resources or a free base.



One way to get drugs to out of the country: a narco-submarine, designed to evade detection while it carries its load of product on the passage northward.

Cartels terror can hurt the Government or FARC politically, but the Cartels most potent weapon is corruption: It can bribe to expose, hide, or neutralize enemy forces—anywhere. Bribes are expensive, however, and so only become a true threat once the Cartels are well above their victory goal in resources. And so the other factions face a choice: dedicate precious time and resources early on and constantly to trim the Cartels weeds, or get around to it later and risk Cartels growing so rich that they can block any offensive by bribing their way out.



Andean Abyss event cards.