



Colombia, the United States, and Security Cooperation by Proxy

By Arlene B. Tickner

Introduction

U.S. aid to Colombia has declined considerably since 2008. Counternarcotics and counterinsurgency activities, in which Washington has been heavily involved since Plan Colombia's inception in 2000, have been steadily "Colombianized." Now, Colombia is stepping up efforts to export its "know-how" to countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and to nations beyond the Western Hemisphere affected by drug-related crime and violence, largely via South-South cooperation and triangulated efforts with U.S. support. This report explores what seems to be an

emerging international security cooperation model in which both Colombia and the United States play key roles.

Although Colombian training of security personnel in third countries is an established and growing practice, we know little about who is being trained, by whom, what is being taught, and who is providing the funding. The lack of publicly available information raises a number of important concerns:

- Is this security cooperation model truly replicating Colombia's successes without also copying its failures, especially in the realm of corruption, human rights, and impunity?



One of the country's main exportable assets is its security forces, widely considered to be among the world's most seasoned in counternarcotics and counterinsurgency, in no small measure due to prolonged U.S. training.

- Why is it so difficult to obtain information about Colombia's specific activities—far more so than in the case of regular U.S. security assistance—beyond the optimistic but vague language of official press releases?
- How strong is civilian control and oversight of these programs, including human rights vetting of both trainers and trainees?
- To what extent is Colombian training based on an outdated and largely discredited “drug war” logic that prioritizes numbers arrested, acres eradicated, and tons interdicted over good governance and economic prosperity?

Exporting Colombian security: How we got here

As the twentieth century came to a close, the chronic weakness of the Colombian state had brought the country to what many analysts feared was the brink of collapse. Presidents Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) actively courted their American counterparts, encouraging them to move beyond a narrow focus on counternarcotics to become more involved in the internal conflict. This “intervention by invitation” strategy ([Tickner 2007](#)) entailed acceptance of the U.S. counternarcotics agenda in exchange for sorely needed military, technical, and socio-economic support from Washington. Foreign aid sought to expand, professionalize, and modernize the armed forces, combat armed insurgents, increase territorial control, and later, during the Plan Colombia Consolidation Phase (2007-2013), extend the rule of law and pursue economic and social development.

Between 2000 and 2008, U.S. military and economic aid to Colombia exceeded \$6 billion, making it the largest recipient of American assistance in Latin America and one of the top ten worldwide. In what has been described invariably

as an “extraordinary transformation,” Colombia's security situation improved during the second term of President Álvaro Uribe's government (2006-2010), and has continued to do so during that of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2014). The state has achieved greater control over the countryside, thousands of paramilitary fighters have demobilized, punishing defeats have been delivered to the guerrillas, and large numbers of rebels have voluntarily surrendered. Key indicators of violence, including kidnappings, homicides, disappearances, and forced displacement, have also declined. Arguably, the “war on drugs” too has resulted in relative gains as measured by a decline in illicit crop acreage and total cocaine production in Colombia, although these are largely offset by the migration of drug cultivation, production, trafficking and violence elsewhere in the region, most notably Peru, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Such trends are the raw materials for a “success story” that the Santos government has put to strategic use to reposition Colombia, both regionally and internationally. One of the country's main exportable assets is its security forces, widely considered to be among the world's most seasoned in counternarcotics and counterinsurgency, in no small measure due to prolonged U.S. training.

Since the mid-2000s, Colombia has received increasing numbers of requests for security cooperation from governments of distinct ideological stripes throughout Latin America and beyond. The International Affairs Office of the Colombian National Police (CNP) reports that between 2009 and 2013, it provided police and military training to 21,949 individuals from 47 different countries in such skills as ground, air, maritime, and river interdiction, police testimony, explosives, intelligence operations, psychological operations, and Comando JUNGLA, the U.S.- designed signature elite counternarcotics police program ([Jenzen Jones 2011](#)). 87 percent of this training was provided by the CNP. Notwithstanding the

range of nationalities trained, Colombia has focused largely on a cluster of countries where distinct drug-related problems have migrated, including Mexico (which accounts for nearly half of the total number of trainees), Panama, Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador and Costa Rica (See Table 1). Some of this training was U.S. funded, although Colombia carried out many activities using its own resources, or that of other donors such as Canada.

In its eagerness to assure that diminishing U.S. assistance did not translate into reduced bilateral ties and even less aid, the Colombian government set out to convince Washington to deepen its commitment to cooperation efforts in third countries. Police training for Afghanistan provided an initial testing ground in 2007, but it was not deemed much of a success given the limited applicability of the Colombian case, among other factors. In 2009, however, Colombia's participation in the Mérida Initiative aid package for Mexico, in activities related to law enforcement and judicial strengthening, changed perspectives in policymaking circles. Colombia's role appeared to be, all at once, an effective way to meet Mexico's security needs, to satisfy Colombia's desire to expand its training portfolio, and to mitigate fiscal limitations in the United States. In this view, Colombia, with U.S. backing, could provide other countries with security cooperation at a greatly reduced economic expense, and without the political costs associated with an enlarged U.S. military presence. This new reading of the bilateral relation reflected the philosophy that "as

we help Colombia, Colombia will help us help others," and largely paralleled changes in American security and defense policy, in which "leading from behind" became a key feature.

Leading from Behind

In the post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan, post-financial crisis era, the importance of "light footprint" approaches has grown in tandem with U.S. public opinion's adversity to costly, direct military involvement in contexts not perceived as directly threatening vital security interests. In a 2010 Foreign Affairs article, former secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates laid out the initial blueprint for this strategy by calling on the United States to "help others help themselves" through institutional and human capacity building, and through steady and long-term security assistance ([Gates 2010](#)).

Increasingly, Colombia is portrayed as an emblematic case of this "light footprint" (see, for example, [Luján 2013](#); [Robinson 2013](#); and [Jayamaha, Brady, Fitzgerald and Fritz 2010](#)). However, equally important from the vantage of current U.S. security and defense policy ([U.S. Department of Defense 2012](#)), Colombia is unique due to its long-standing and mature bilateral military partnership, especially with Special Operations Forces, whose presence in the country spans half a century ([Thomas and Dougherty 2013](#); [Special Warfare 2012](#)).

As Robert D. Kaplan ([2006](#)) observes somewhat forebodingly, Colombia became a test case for tactics

Table 1: Police and Military Personnel Trained by Colombia 2009-2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total by Country
Mexico	4,676	1,388	892	132	3,222	10,310
Guatemala	7	5	211	316	1,193	1,732
Honduras	2	622	214	34	1,737	2,609
Panama	393	575	644	1,013	401	3,026
El Salvador	0	19	56	150	240	465
Costa Rica	9	15	149	137	67	377
Ecuador	8	280	160	436	248	1,132
Peru	42	214	146	30	78	510
Other Countries	595	220	276	311	386	1,788

Table 2: Areas and Support Activities in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama

		Country*			
		Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Panama
Areas	Crime	Financial Crimes and Asset Forfeiture, Major Crimes Task Force	Intelligence led policing, Polygraphers	Polygraph Administration and Training, Extortion Investigations, Seminar on Intelligence Activities	Polygraph Administration and Training, Money Laundering/Assets Forfeiture, Intelligence Units
	Narcotrafficking	National Police Intelligence Unit, Police Counter Drug Labs Training, Basic Riverine Operation Mobile Training Team, Small Boat Operation Mobile Training Team, Intelligence Officer Course, Command and Control Subject Matter Expert Exchange and Assessment, Tactical Response Training Team	Ground Interdiction Support, Small Boat Operation Mobile Training Team, Tactical Response Team Training, Civil Affairs Subject Matter Expert Exchange and Assessment, Fixed and Rotary Wing Pilot Training Course	Basic Riverine Operation Mobile Training Team, Small Boat Operation Mobile Training Team, Air Assault and Special Forces Tactical Response Team Training	Jungla Training, Basic Riverine Operation Mobile Training Team, Small Boat Operation Mobile Training Team, Aerial Target Analysis Course, Tactical Response Team Training
	Rule of Law	Judicial and Prosecutor Protection	Institutional Strengthening, Training and Curriculum	Seminar on Managing Informants	Police Testimony course, Police Intelligence Training
	Resilient Communities		Citizen Security		

*In 2014, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic were added to this initial list of countries

that the United States would employ to manage messy global problems. According to a retired Army general Kaplan interviewed, in order to police the world, “you produce a product and let him loose.” What emerged from Colombia was exactly this: a security cooperation model designed not only to improve that country’s own internal security, but also applicable to changing U.S. security objectives in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere.

Indigenous partners are the “strategic linchpin” (Lujan 2013: 1) of this “light footprint” model. Working “by, with and through” them (a saying repeated often by U.S. officials and military analysts) allows for results at a lesser material and political cost. Moreover, the use of third-party “proxies” creates “plausible deniability” (Thomas and Dougherty 2013: xiii):

denial of knowledge of or responsibility for unpopular or illegal activities. Cooperation by proxy rests upon an esprit de corps cultivated through prolonged, iterated engagement with foreign counterparts, the existence of personal, first-name relations, the creation of liaison elements to ensure connectivity, and support for host country objectives in order to develop commonality of purpose (Luján 2013; Special Warfare 2012; Thomas and Dougherty 2013). As capacity-building proceeds and partnership matures, the “cream of the crop” of local militaries and police can graduate from internal functions to regional or global security providers.

According (2013: 85) to Thomas and Dougherty, “Colombia is... a ‘net security exporter,’ providing counternarcotics training to numerous countries

in Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa,” and thus a key node of an emerging global Special Operations Forces network. This view is echoed (Petraeus and O’Hanlon 2013) by former military commander and CIA director David Petraeus, who considers Colombia to be one of Washington’s strongest allies in the world, one better poised than the United States to help regions such as Central America.

Colombia Helping Others

Until the mid-2000s, external requests for Colombian security cooperation were dealt with in an ad-hoc and piecemeal fashion. Although the final years of the Uribe government saw attempts to make more systematic use of armed forces’ security know-how, few governments wanted to be seen working openly with the Colombian President, given his hard-line anti-terrorist discourse. Juan Manuel Santos’ election in 2010 provided a prime opportunity to move this effort forward. Santos set out to switch prevalent narratives about Colombia as a failing state with a weak human rights record and deficient democratic institutions. In tandem with this shift in official discourse, Santos placed security cooperation at the center of foreign policy.

The Santos administration christened this program the “International Integral Security Cooperation Strategy,” and tasked the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Relations (MFR) as its civilian spokesperson, responsible for interacting with foreign governments and coordinating specific cooperation efforts with the Ministry of Defense, the CNP, and the Presidential Agency for International Cooperation (APC). According to the MFR’s brochure, the program offers a portfolio of a la carte services in seven areas: organizational development, counternarcotics, organized crime, citizen security, anti-corruption, human rights and international humanitarian law, and operational capacities. It tailors cooperation to each country’s needs through a four-stage process, consisting of an initial security and institutional capacity diagnosis; planning and fundraising; implementation; and follow-up and evaluation. Specific

information on individual cooperation initiatives is not publicly available.

With the onset of peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas in November 2012, the country’s “security diplomacy,” as the Defense Ministry calls it (2013a), acquired additional urgency. As Colombia has the second largest military and police force in Latin America (after Brazil), numbering over 450,000 personnel, some downsizing is inevitable under most post-conflict scenarios. The 2013 Ministry of Defense report to Congress lays out the Santos government’s game plan for putting this surplus capacity to effective use abroad. In addition to upping international security cooperation, in June 2013 Colombia signed an agreement with NATO, the first of its kind with a Latin American country, with an eye to increasing its participation in peacekeeping operations.

Parallel to Colombia’s own efforts to become a security exporter, in February 2012 it began a Strategic High Level Security Dialogue (HLSSD) with the United States. Several months later, at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Cartagena, presidents Santos and Obama announced an Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation to support capacity-building in Central America, the Caribbean, and eventually West Africa. A Coordination Group on Security Cooperation (SCCG) was subsequently tasked to develop specific aspects of the Action Plan.

The recent creation of an International Cooperation Division at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, a line item of US\$15 million in the Narcotics Affairs Section’s (NAS) 2014 budget, strongly suggests that triangulated security cooperation is not a passing fad. This division acts as liaison between American diplomatic missions in third countries, third country state representatives (civilian and military), and Colombian actors, mainly the Ministry of Defense and CNP. The fact that its staff includes a retired Colombian police colonel, an active Colombian police sergeant, and two Colombian civilians also points to an unprecedented degree of bilateral embeddedness and trust.

Officials from both countries maintain that joint security efforts abroad play a key role in achieving

their respective objectives: for Colombia, projecting leadership regionally and globally and planning for the post-conflict; and for the United States, interrupting the flow of illegal drugs across its borders and combating violence and state weakness in Central America and the Caribbean. However, they also recognize Colombia's political and strategic value as a U.S. proxy, and that the use of Colombian facilities and trainers can be up to four times less expensive than the use of U.S. assets.

More Questions than Answers

Despite both governments' enthusiasm, which includes viewing the Colombia-U.S. international security cooperation as deployable elsewhere, this model poses more questions than answers.

a. Is Colombia truly a success story?

Colombian Ministry of Defense (2013b) figures indicate that between 2000 and 2013, homicides in Colombia dropped 43 percent, kidnappings 95 percent and terrorist attacks 47 percent. No less impressive, unemployment was reduced by half and poverty levels dropped from 50 percent to 34 percent. Notwithstanding such improvements, the jury is still out in terms of how to weight Colombia's success and failures. As WOLA's Adam Isacson [warned](#) in 2010, security gains are "partial...and weighed down by 'collateral damage.'"

While Colombia's progress is encouraging, its homicide rate remains above 30 per 100,000, worse than Mexico and about the same as Guatemala. Other [indicators of violence](#), including members of the security forces killed in combat, extortion of businesses, and attacks on infrastructure, remain stubbornly high or have even increased. And both guerrillas and "new" paramilitary groups, while weaker than a decade ago, continue to be some of the largest insurgent and illegal groupings in the history of Latin America.

According to the National Center for Historical Memory (2013), the number of displaced persons in Colombia is a horrific 5,700,000, equivalent to 15

percent of the national population. The [2013 report](#) of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights praises government policies such as the 2011 Victims and Land Restitution Law, but highlights significant deficiencies in their implementation and identifies other severe human rights problems. Among these are continued killings and threats against human rights activists, journalists, and community leaders, and low conviction rates for human rights abuses committed by the security forces, most notably the "false positives" scandal, involving over 3,000 extrajudicial killings by the armed forces. Judicial sluggishness in investigating and sentencing approximately 700 elected and appointed public officials accused of collusion with paramilitary groups points more generally to the problem of impunity in Colombia.

While poverty has indeed decreased, National Administrative Department of Statistics ([DANE](#)) data indicate that in the countryside poverty levels reached 46.8 percent in 2012, suggesting a rise in the gap between urban and rural areas. Inequality, too, has remained stubbornly high during the past decade; Colombia continues to be one of the most unequal countries in the world with the 12th highest income GINI coefficient among 101 countries measured by the UN Development Program ([UNDP 2013: 152-5](#)). No less significant, bureaucratic capacity and infrastructure, indispensable for the proper functioning of state institutions, are still sorely lacking ([García and Espinosa 2012](#)).

b. What is being exported, by whom, to whom and with what effect?

The lack of public knowledge about both Colombian unilateral and Colombia-U.S. triangulated security cooperation in third countries severely constrains the possibility for independent citizen oversight. Beyond official advertisements of the strategy and occasional, anecdotal press reports, little information is available about the extent and nature of Colombia's training. While foreign aid law requires the United States to report to Congress in some detail about its own overseas training, these reports include no mention of U.S.-funded activities carried out by Colombian forces.

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This distorts U.S. reporting to congressional overseers. When training performed by Colombians is removed from the picture, the training of thousands of personnel within the Mérida Initiative and Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) frameworks becomes invisible to the public.

During 2013, the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation identified a set of training priorities in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama, including: financial crimes and assets forfeiture, intelligence activities, counter-drug laboratories, judicial and prosecutor protection, basic riverine operations, small boat operations, tactical response, polygraph administration, ground interdiction, fixed and rotary wing pilots, management of informants, air assault, police testimony, citizen security, and civil affairs operations (See Table 2). However, the names of the police (and military) units providing and receiving training in each country, the title and contents of different training courses, the sources of trainee funding, and the total cost of training remain undisclosed.

Additionally, evaluation mechanisms for measuring the security cooperation's impact are weak. Colombian officials concede that few concrete indicators are in place for evaluating their success or failure. The effectiveness of U.S. security cooperation too has been the target of intense debate during the past several years (see [Ribando and Finklea 2013](#); [Adams and Williams 2011](#); and [Moroney et. al. 2009](#)). In order to increase its efficiency and sustainability, responsible officials have placed emphasis on improving coordination between donors and recipients; aligning cooperation with the recipient countries' objectives and capacities; enhancing local capacity-building; involving citizens in cooperation efforts; and improving evaluation mechanisms.

Although success is normally measured through quantitative indicators such as price/purity of

narcotics, number of drug arrests and drug seizures, number of personnel trained, and homicide rates, such statistics are increasingly being acknowledged as poor gauges of security cooperation's impact. Even worse, certain indicators, such as "enemy" casualties, have prompted illegal practices such as "false positives" in Colombia (and, to some extent, Honduras).

c. Civilian control is weak

Although billed as a civilian-run security cooperation program, in practice the Colombian Ministry of Defense, the Colombian National Police, and to a lesser degree, other branches of the armed forces are clearly at the helm. Beyond its formal role as a liaison between the Colombian government and others, including the United States, the Ministry of Foreign Relations lacks the bandwidth for direct involvement in the planning and day-to-day operation of specific initiatives. Although its key advisor is a former police chief, Gen (Ret.) Rosso José Serrano, this official's long-standing, direct and close ties with numerous U.S. and Latin American security agencies make it reasonable to assume that the Ministry's own institutional voice is quite small. Indeed, the CNP and the Defense Ministry, not Foreign Relations, are the program's main interlocutors at NAS, at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá.

As for human rights, Colombian officials assert that all of their international training programs use the same protocols employed within the Colombian armed forces. Colombia lacks the wherewithal to apply human rights vetting, which screens potential recipients of assistance to ensure that known abusers will not benefit. The United States claims to carry this out for all received cooperation requests, although the lack of transparency surrounding the program has made this impossible to verify. While U.S.

officials interviewed claim that potential recipients of Colombian training, funded either by the United States or others, are vetted, it is less clear whether the Colombian trainers themselves are subject to vetting. Also, few mechanisms other than human rights vetting seem to be in place to guarantee that “worst” practices, such as corruption and impunity, are not transferred by Colombian trainers along with “best” ones.

d. The nuts and bolts of the “drug war” are being reproduced

Calls to rethink the prohibitionist and militarist bent of current drug policy have emerged from myriad corners of the Western Hemisphere, including the United States (Isacson, et. al. 2013). It is no small irony that Juan Manuel Santos, the first sitting president in the world to make a public plea for an informed and sincere debate on the benefits and shortcomings of existing strategies, is also exporting, hand in hand with the United States, some of the very nuts and bolts of the policies that he says deserve closer scrutiny. It remains debatable whether existing counternarcotics training programs can be accommodated to the citizen security needs of those countries receiving Colombian-U.S. cooperation, without reproducing the discredited, and often destructive, logic of the “drug war.”

Policy Recommendations

- **Greater transparency.** Regular and detailed reporting to Congress and the public in the United States, Colombia, and third countries where security training is being provided should be standard practice. In addition to information on the sources and amounts of funding provided by the United States and others (such as Canada) for third country training, formal scrutiny of Colombian trainers, third country trainees and course curricula should be facilitated.
- **Stronger human rights controls.** There is some risk that international cooperation by proxy, as currently being practiced by the United States and

Colombia, may evade existing human rights vetting procedures. The Department of State must ensure that the U.S. embassy in Colombia vets Colombian trainers, and that the U.S. embassy in the recipient country vets training candidates, in order to guarantee that members of units that stand credibly accused of gross human rights violations are excluded from training.

- **Better evaluation and follow-up.** Colombian security cooperation currently lacks adequate procedures for evaluating the short, medium and long-term impact of the training provided in third countries. Appropriate measures of success, rooted in local capacity building and citizen security, should be identified by distinct country participants in coordination with civil society actors. Accountability and follow-up mechanisms should also be created in order to reinforce transparency.

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1666 Connecticut Avenue NW
Suite 400 | Washington DC 20009
telephone: 202.797.2171 | facsimile: 202.797.2172
email: wola@wola.org | web: www.wola.org

This publication was written by Arlene B. Tickner, professor of International Relations, Political Science Department, Universidad de los Andes, Bogota. In researching this report the following acting and former officials from Colombia and the United States granted the author interviews under the condition that their specific opinions remain anonymous: María Ángela Holguín, Colombian Minister of Foreign Relations; Paty Londoño, Colombian Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations; Michael McKinley, former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia; William Brownfield, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs; James Story, former Director, Narcotics Affairs Section, United States Embassy in Bogotá; Carl Gettinger, former Chief, International Coordination Division, Narcotics Affairs Section, United States Embassy in Bogotá; Gabriel Silva Lujan, former Colombian Ambassador to the United States; former Defense Minister; Vicente Echandía, former Minister Adviser, Colombian Embassy in Washington, D.C.; General (r) Oscar Naranjo, former Director of the Colombian National Police; Coronel Joaquín Buitrago, Director of International Affairs, Colombian National Police; General (r) Rosso José Serrano, former Director of the Colombian National Police and security advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Another dozen officials whom the author interviewed asked that their names not be included.

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