

# Partnership: The Colombia-U.S. Experience

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**S**trong security partnerships are not born overnight. They must be built on a foundation of shared goals, mutual respect, and understanding. The Colombia-U.S. security partnership is built upon just such a relationship, one that evolved over generations and spans multiple sectors. Although, in common with all Latin American countries, Colombia's historical and cultural roots can be traced to the Iberian colonization of the Western Hemisphere, trade, diplomatic, and military relations with the United States date back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The United States was among the first countries to recognize Colombia when it declared independence from Spain, receiving a diplomatic representative in Washington in 1822 and establishing its first diplomatic mission in Cartagena and Santa Marta in 1823. The first commercial treaty between the two young countries was signed in 1824, followed by a treaty of friendship and commerce in 1848.<sup>2</sup> The Colombia-U.S. relationship has not been without its ups and downs historically, but it has led to familiarity, and in recent years a common understanding of shared security challenges in the Western Hemisphere.

This chapter describes the context, as well as the richness, of a partnership based on shared goals, demonstrable commitment to those goals, mutual respect, trust, and consultation. While Plan Colombia, a Colombia-U.S. initiative targeting security issues and drug-trafficking, was a historic and epic phase of the Colombia-U.S. partnership, much has been written on it, and therefore it is not the focus of this chapter. The chapter instead offers context and insight into the effort to reform and strengthen Colombia's defense institutions that succeeded Plan Colombia and the working Colombia-U.S. partnership between 2013 and 2015.

## **In Bolivar's Shadow**

Political conflict has been persistent throughout Colombia's history. The country was forged in resistance to Spanish colonialism, resistance that came in the form of protests against *mal gobierno*, the formation of juntas for representation, and with inspiration from the U.S. and French revolutions. The juntas formed in this early period of Colombia's history struggled with concepts of leadership, representation, and forms of government, federalism or centralism—struggles that have haunted the country until the present day. Simon Bolivar led the independence movement and the early process of state consolidation.

In 1821, the Constitution of Colombia, the Cucuta Constitution, was signed, establishing a centralist government with popular representation, Bolivar as president, and his top military general, Francisco de Paula Santander, as vice president. Tensions emerged early between the civilian and military spheres, personalized in the competition between Bolivar and Santander.

Political divisions persisted in Colombia through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Personalism and regionalism remained key factors in national politics, but by 1849 ideological fissures led to the emergence of two competing political parties: Partido Liberal and Partido Conservador, both of which would dominate Colombian politics until the 1980s. Liberals sought a weakened executive branch, liberalization of state monopolies, free trade, and freedom of press, education, religion, and business; more than anything, they were anticolonial. The conservatives preferred neocolonial structures, a strong church-state alliance, the preservation of slavery, and a more authoritarian form of government.

Surviving a coup d'état in 1854, military dictatorship, civil war, and dozens of local conflicts, the liberal and conservative parties competed and alternated power throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The intensity of their competition created fertile ground for the sporadic violence that has scarred Colombia's history. In July 1899, for instance, this fierce competition led to the outbreak of the War of a Thousand Days resulting in thousands of casualties.

The turn of the century was also a rocky period in Colombia-U.S. relations, as tension over Panama and the soon-to-be-built canal pitted their respective national interests in conflict, with Colombia too weak at the time to prevent Panama's secession in 1903. The more cordial tone was restored when Woodrow Wilson was elected U.S. President in 1913. Wilson signed the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty (though it was not ratified by the U.S. Senate until 1921) while his government expressed regret for U.S. actions in 1903, and paid a \$25 million indemnity.<sup>3</sup>

The period 1948 through 1958 (or as late as 1965 by some accounts), known historically as *La Violencia*, which began with the assassination of liberal politician Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, was particularly wrenching, characterized by political assassinations, riots, uprisings, and extreme cruelty. As many as 200,000 Colombians perished during this violent decade.<sup>4</sup>

## Popular Uprisings

*La Violencia* ended with an entente between the perpetually feuding and sometimes warring liberal and conservative parties, known as the National Front. The National Front was a short-lived experiment in coalition government and conflict mitigation, representing residual competing interests within the elite classes of the two major parties. It was, however, not an inclusive accord and failed to address the interests and concerns of the rural poor. The Colombian Communist Party, taking inspiration from the Soviet Union and Cuban revolution, did not join the National Front, which it dismissed as an exclusivist deal among

elites. The emergence of rural-based and Marxist-influenced guerrilla movements, notably the National Liberation Army (ELN) in 1964 and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1966, signaled a proclamation of those class interests and marked the inauguration of another protracted period of political violence in Colombia, but with new players. The ELN and FARC insurgencies were primarily fought in Colombia's rural areas. Their shared goal was to create a society in which the needs and concerns of neglected rural populations would be addressed. To pay for its movement, the FARC initially depended on kidnapping for ransom until the late 1970s when it began trafficking cocaine to fund its activities. Despite numerous attempts at peace accords, both ELN and FARC's violent tactics and kidnappings continued due to a lack of trust in government reforms.

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, the insurgency came to the cities. A new guerrilla organization, M-19, or the 19<sup>th</sup> of April Movement, rose from the electoral controversy of 1970 with a mixed ideology of revolutionary socialism and populism and committed spectacular acts of terrorism, including the 1985 siege of the Ministry of Justice. Among the 100 casualties were 11 of the 21 justices of Colombia's Supreme Court. In response to the threat from these left-wing groups, a right-wing umbrella group—the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—was formed in 1997 by landowners and drug-trafficking cartels, such as the powerful Medellin- and Cali-based organizations. Powerful drug lords helped build the paramilitary armies that made up the AUC. The group carried out multiple massacres and assassinations, targeting left-wing guerrilla groups and activists, as well as those who spoke out against the drug trade.<sup>5</sup>

## Narco Wars and the Descent into Chaos

Colombia's narco wars, inflamed by poverty, rampant inequality, and the structural weaknesses of the state, compounded the violence resulting from the rural and urban insurgencies. In the 1970s, poor farmers began planting marijuana, a far more lucrative alternative to the traditional, legal crops on which they had struggled to survive on in the past. Rapidly growing demand for drugs in the United States fueled dramatic increases in production in Colombia. In the 1980s, the major cocaine cartels emerged, most notably Pablo Escobar's Medellin cartel and the Cali cartel in the southwest. The burgeoning cocaine trade generated unprecedented volumes of cash and added a further dimension of lawlessness in Colombia. In time, the cartels' cocaine empires ran from Bolivia, through Colombia and up to Miami, Los Angeles, and New York. The cartels fought each other, and both fought against, and corrupted from within, the Colombian state, armed forces, and police. By 1993, with the ongoing insurgencies, Colombia had become the "murder capital of the world, with a homicide rate of 381 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants."<sup>6</sup>

Eventually aggressive action by the armed forces, with substantial help from a number of U.S. agencies, brought down the Medellin and Cali cartels, but the drug trade continued. Opportunist criminal groups that allied to defeat the larger syndicates took over supply and distribution routes. The new groups learned their tradecraft from the successes and failures

of the Medellín and Cali cartels. They included paramilitary groups composed of ex- and active police who found that the fall of the large drug empires offered opportunities and benefits. The fall of the Medellín and Cali cartels led to the end of direct purchase of coca paste from Peru and Bolivia and a boom in coca production in Colombia, which fell into the hands of these small criminal groups as well as the insurgents—most notably, the AUC, FARC, and Norte Del Valle (a drug cartel operating in the Valle del Cauca department).

The breakup of Norte del Valle and the demobilization of the AUC led to the creation of criminal-paramilitary hybrids called *bandas criminales*, criminal bands, or BACRIM—which marked a new era for Colombian crime, beginning around 2006.<sup>7</sup> The largest active standing BACRIM today is the Urabenos, who are both excluded and out of the purview of current peace talks. The BACRIM continue to constitute a criminal challenge to Colombian law enforcement.

## The Long History Behind the Partnership

The yearning for democracy ran deep in Colombia, and early consultation with U.S. leaders, including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, led to sustained amity between the two countries. Tensions between Spain and the United States led Jefferson to declare that the Spanish colonies had “a right to be free, and we a right to aid them” and that if a war were to occur between Spain and the United States, then he favored “joining the South Americans, and entering into treaties of alliance with them.”<sup>8</sup> Shortly thereafter, Henry Clay pushed Congress to support independence in South America.

In the following years, the United States would often see its forces fighting alongside South Americans, and vice versa. By 1820, the Colombian navy contained a considerable number of U.S. volunteers. Colombian military officials and youth came to the United States at this time to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and other U.S. educational institutions. The turbulence of Colombian governance—the shifting presidencies, regimes, and dictatorships, and outright warfare during La Violencia—caused periodic tensions in bilateral relations. These tensions were exacerbated by periodic trade disagreements, and naturally concerns over the Hay-Herran Treaty, rejection of which by the Colombian legislature ultimately led to U.S. support for a political uprising on the isthmus and Panama’s independence. Still, U.S. troops worked alongside Colombian troops to monitor the canal. This relationship was remedied by the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty in 1914, which promised Colombia remittances for Panama. World War I delayed these remittances until 1921, but an economic partnership was initiated and sustained.

Colombia remained neutral during World War I, but by World War II found itself on the side of the Allies, fighting German U-boats after a series of attacks on Colombian ships. World War II facilitated closer military cooperation between Colombia and the United States. Previously, Switzerland and the United Kingdom had provided Colombia with military aviation and naval support; however, due to proximity and strength of its big

northern neighbor, Colombia shifted the focus of its military partnership to the United States. Both countries agreed to prevent attacks on the Panama Canal, and the United States agreed to assist Colombia if it came under attack. Colombia even allowed the United States to use its military facilities as part of an inter-American agreement and contingent upon the need of another South American republic during time of war. Both countries exchanged technical advisers, patrol officers, and strategy.

As a result of this alliance, Colombia was able to modernize its military, and participate in the Lend-Lease Act beginning in 1942, which paved the way for other loans and grants to build public infrastructure. Private U.S. investment in Colombia soared as a result, and even the Colombian air force was further developed with the assistance of aircraft shipments from the United States. In 1951, Colombia, as a U.S. ally seeking to strengthen the Colombia-U.S. relationship, entered the Korean War. It was the only country in Latin America to do so.<sup>9</sup> According to Bradley Lynn Coleman, the “Cold War transformed the Colombian-American conventional defense partnership into an internal security alliance. . . . By December 1960 the two countries had formed the basis of the modern Colombian-American internal security alliance.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1955, facing growing domestic disorder resulting from La Violencia, Colombia established the Escuela de Lancers. At this time, Colombian military personnel began attending U.S. training schools to learn the art of counterinsurgency. Their counterinsurgency training in the United States, particularly at Fort Benning, led to the creation of companies of Lancers to combat guerrilla groups. The United States also provided materiel assistance to pursue guerrilla groups, primarily through Plan Lazo in 1962. Under Plan Lazo, the Colombian military developed a pacification plan in which an attempt would be made to separate vulnerable populations from guerrillas through land reform, political inclusion, patrols, airmobile operations, and civil defense. Colombia and the United States worked together on military training and the administration of nonmilitary aid.<sup>11</sup>

During the Cold War, Colombia was the largest supplier of students to the U.S. Army School of the Americas, where soldiers received counterinsurgency training. As the Cold War, and its defining fight against global communism, drew to a close, the focus of the School of the Americas shifted to the so-called war on drugs.

## Plan Colombia

By the late 1990s, as the FARC, ELN, and AUC insurgencies persisted, and drug-related violence peaked, many considered Colombia to be on the brink of state failure.<sup>12</sup> Colombians participated in “*No Mas*” protests in cities throughout the country. According to Colombia’s National Administrative Statistics Department, between 1995 and 2000 over 700,000 migrants left the country, many of them frightened members of the middle class.<sup>13</sup> However, the country:

*has been converging fast toward higher living standards since the early 2000s. Sound macroeconomic policy reforms—the adoption of an inflation targeting regime, a flexible exchange rate, a structural fiscal rule and solid financial regulation—have underpinned growth and reduced macroeconomic volatility. From nationwide lawlessness in the late 1990s, when insurgent groups controlled as much as 40 to 50 percent of Colombian territory, the state has recaptured control, with only six percent of municipalities . . . affected by terrorism by the end of 2014.<sup>14</sup>*

How did this dramatic reversal of national fortunes take place, and how was Colombia rescued from failure?

Plan Colombia was, as its name implies, a Colombian plan to restore order to the beleaguered country. The initiative of the administration of Colombian President Andres Pastrana in 1998, it was embraced by U.S. President Bill Clinton and U.S. financial support began to flow. While the human cost of the insurgencies in Colombia was certainly devastating, and the insurgencies were the primary concern of Colombia's leadership, it was the scourge of cocaine, particularly the crack cocaine epidemic in the United States and the associated crime, that caught the attention of U.S. leaders in the 1980s. The so-called war on drugs was launched by U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1971, but it became a national cause celebre when championed by First Lady Nancy Reagan, whose "just say no" campaign kicked off in 1986. At that point Colombian and U.S. interests began to converge around the drug issue and an enhanced partnership began—the shared burden being the growing devastation caused by drug-trafficking.

The Pastrana administration envisioned Plan Colombia as a new Marshall Plan, where foreign aid could be leveraged to carry out social development programs in support of possible peace processes with the insurgencies. Pastrana firmly believed that negotiation processes with the FARC should have been premised on identifying and eliminating the elements of poverty, inequality, and the absence of democratic opportunities countrywide, all of which he believed are drivers of violence. The U.S. Congress, however, had other priorities—namely halting the flow of cocaine into the United States. Shaped in part by congressional priorities, Plan Colombia evolved with a heavy emphasis on counternarcotic operations. Colombia established an army counternarcotics brigade and by 1999, 43,246 hectares of coca had been eradicated. By 2002, more than 122,695 hectares had been eliminated.<sup>15</sup> Though the emphasis was on counternarcotics, much of the effort fell onto the armed forces, and the Colombian professional army grew by 150 percent between 1998 and 2002, to around 200,000 in 2003, equipped with robust offensive capability, strategy, and vastly improved morale.<sup>16</sup> But with the United States not wanting to get bogged down in a counterinsurgency operation, and in order to insulate itself, a "battalion of 3,000 men trained by U.S. special forces could not be used to combat the guerrillas or paramilitaries unless their targets were clearly protecting drug labs or coca fields."<sup>17</sup>

In the wake of the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11,

2001(9/11), the original congressional resistance to supporting the military campaign against the Colombian insurgency dissipated. Post-9/11, both the United States and Colombia shifted focus from the narco-cartels to countering terrorism and combatting the FARC. This began with the Infrastructure Security Strategy, which was designed to protect the Cano Limon oil pipeline from guerrilla attacks. U.S. Special Forces worked with counter guerrilla battalions of Colombia's 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade to protect the pipeline until 2005.<sup>18</sup>

Elected in 2002 on a security-first platform, President Alvaro Uribe shifted the national security focus definitively to the fight against the insurgents, firmly believing that development depends on security. His premise was that security would generate confidence and investment, as well as an "environment for security." Uribe's policy came to be known as democratic security and brought "a level of focus to the conflict that had never been previously seen, using his personality and energy to infuse a more intense and committed effort into the security forces as well."<sup>19</sup> He was able to strengthen Colombian security forces without sacrificing social development programs. Increased security under his presidency led to more than 31,000 paramilitary combatants laying down their arms and to over 22,000 guerrillas deserting and entering into government-led rehabilitation programs.<sup>20</sup> Plan Colombia gave Uribe's government the means—both in terms of funding and U.S. partnership—to strengthen and modernize the country's armed forces while dismantling militia groups, their logistics networks, and their leadership. In executing Plan Colombia, Colombia and the United States grew closer, and the partnership became one of mutual trust, as it shifted from advice and training to alliance and consultation.

Throughout the life of Plan Colombia, the United States contributed over \$10 billion, but Colombia invested a great deal more.<sup>21</sup> This is an important point; upon taking office in 2002 President Uribe proposed a 1.2 percent "war tax" on approximately 400,000 wealthy individuals and businesses.<sup>22</sup> While U.S. investment has been substantial and perhaps even catalytic, the vast majority of the cost of the past nearly 20 years of recovery from the brink of state failure has been paid by the Colombian people.

Although Plan Colombia still has skeptics and critics, many in Colombia and the United States firmly believe it was a strategic success for both countries. Coca cultivation declined from 160,000 hectares to 48,000 hectares from 2000 to 2013.<sup>23</sup> Far more important though, from a strategic vantage point, Plan Colombia enabled the country to recover from the brink of failure by dismantling the AUC and imposing unsustainable military costs on the FARC. While drugs have been, from the Colombian perspective, a scourge, fighting the war on drugs was the means to a much larger end: to recover territorial control, establish rule of law, pacify the country, and bring prosperity to the Colombian people. Between 2003 and 2008, as many as 31,000 paramilitary fighters were disarmed and demobilized.<sup>24</sup> Many paramilitary leaders were tried and convicted or extradited for trial to the United States. Between 2001 and 2012, the number of FARC combatants was reduced from as many as 16,000 to fewer than 7,000.<sup>25</sup> While the war on drugs in Colombia may not have been won by Plan Colombia, the war to restore state sovereignty was. In late 2016, the government of Colombia reached a historic agreement with the FARC, bringing an end to five decades

of civil war. It is likely that the government will soon reach a similar agreement with the ELN. Although there certainly remain many causes for concern in what is inevitably an imperfect deal, this should at least bring about an end to major armed violence. Today, Colombia is thriving both economically and socially.

## **Modernizing the Force: Plan Colombia to Peace Colombia**

Over the course of Plan Colombia, the Colombia-U.S. partnership broadened and matured. Any vestiges of “mentorship” or “tutorial” dynamics eventually vanished, and the partnership became a collaborative one of sovereign equals in pursuit of common interests. In 2009, the Colombian Ministry of National Defense (MND) requested assistance from the U.S. government to develop certain strategic and institutional tools to ensure the sustainability of the progress that had been made in defeating the FARC militarily, and restoring the security and stability of the nation. Specifically, the MND sought support in assessing the long-term ramifications of current budgetary decisions as well as in aligning budgetary allocations with national strategic objectives.

One illustrative example of the critical initiatives of this collaborative relationship was the introduction of the Defense Resource Management Reform (DRMR) effort in January 2010. The purpose of the project, implemented by the MND with the U.S. Department of Defense’s Defense Institution Reform Initiative, was to undertake major upgrades to planning and budgeting processes, thus enabling the MND to make informed decisions concerning force structure, readiness, and sustainment, and avoid long-term atrophy and hollowing of the armed forces. The project also examined the requirements to institutionalize adaptability in the Colombian armed forces in order to respond effectively to inevitable future security challenges.

The DRMR effort would support the MND’s enhancement of defense resource management by implementing and institutionalizing three processes: estimating future defense costs, linking strategic planning to budget, and improving investment planning.

The MND had been challenged previously to estimate the long-term costs of many of its decisions and budget requests, and faced increasing pressure and scrutiny from the Ministry of Finance, which was demanding analytic justifications with projections of future impact. The requests related primarily to personnel, health care, pensions, and sustainability for the growing force structure. The DRMR project provided the analytic tools and skills to collect and organize pertinent data, identify the cost-drivers, validate costs, and consolidate them into a single database called the Force-Oriented Cost Information System (FOCIS). From this, the MND is able to project future costs, and identify and analyze alternative options and paths.

Linking strategic planning to the budget was a critical challenge; unlinked, the MND was unable to accurately assess whether budgets were sufficient to support national priorities. Military objectives were not clearly articulated, nor was planning aligned in terms of capabilities or mission areas derived from national strategy. Developing a

planning process that systematically considers long-term force structure development aids in the design and analysis of options that achieve strategic objectives, optimize resources, and minimize risk. The process developed through DRMR, referred to as Capability-Based Planning (CBP), ensures a budget process based on capabilities tied to Colombia's national strategic objectives.

Life-cycle planning for defense-sector investments is complex and should anticipate the costs of training, necessary infrastructure maintenance and upgrades, spare parts, long-term equipment maintenance, and fuel, among many other factors. At the outset of the DRMR project, senior defense leaders were unable to project future spending requirements related to specific equipment or projects with sufficient accuracy, nor was there an integrated investment planning coordination capability. DRMR helped the MND develop a life-cycle cost estimation capability and an investment planning process linked to the new CPB process. This provided the ability to determine which acquisitions best fill capability gaps discovered during the CPB process, while estimating the life-cycle costs, life expectancy, and key performance parameters to be included in instructions for manufacturers.

In the past, the individual military services as well as the National Police, which in Colombia are situated within the MND, developed their strategic plans and justified their respective budget requests according to their own unique criteria, without consideration of the views and plans of the other services. CBP provides the analytic tools and an integrated approach to assessing and addressing capability gaps as well as sustainability concerns. As such, the MND is today much better prepared to effectively assess the fiscal impact of budgetary and investment decisions. Consistent Colombian senior leadership resulted in the publication of directives concerning roles and responsibilities with respect to the new processes, as well as the development and execution of an initial CPB process to link strategy to budget. Furthermore, using the new CPB process, the MND improved investment planning driven by capability gaps discovered during the planning process.

The MND reform had significant institutional implications. Transformation based on application of capability-based force structure planning was institutionally represented by the January 2012 establishment of a Capability Planning Directorate, responsible for developing and managing the CPB process. The following April, the Vice Minister for Strategy and Planning directed the use of FOCIS in developing the 2013–2016 budget and investment process, and validating the funding requirements of anti-FARC operations. The adoption of an advanced concept of human capacity development, based on the capabilities identified in force structure planning, was the responsibility of the Human Capital Directorate. The adoption of improved budgeting processes and systems that standardized previously separate systems and processes of each of the three armed services, and the separation of planning from the budget offices, was accomplished in the Planning and Budgeting Directorate (DPP). In January 2013, the Budget Enhancement and Sustainability Group (GMSP) was established inside the Planning and Budgeting Directorate. GMSP was charged with proposing, designing, and implementing methodologies and models, including FOCIS, that optimize planning practices and decision-making. GMSP serves as

DPP's "think tank" for daily activities and devising new approaches to persistent resource problems.

In January 2013, the MND utilized the CBP to develop the first defense-sector integrated long-term plan, an effort that involved the full support and participation of the army, navy, air force, and national police. This plan projected forward through 2030 and led to a common vision of the threats and challenges facing the defense sector as a whole. This holistic vision allowed for the development of operational concepts for each mission area, replacing concepts for each military service and the National Police. This, in turn, allowed the emergence of the joint and coordinated orientation of the security forces from early planning stages and the improvement of institutional structures, not just operations.

In July 2013, the first long-term estimate of future defense costs through 2040 identified the impact of sustaining current spending associated with Plan Colombia. The results were the basis of the recognition that the existing force could not be sustained at then-current spending levels, leading to the appropriate adjustments in the February 2014 submission of the 2015–2018 Budget and Investment Plan.

In addition to institutional adaptation, the Colombia-U.S. partnership has been a catalyst for cultural change within the Colombian defense sector. Examples of such cultural transformation include significantly improved transparency. Through FOCIS, all information related to the costs of a unit, operation, or project is collected in a single database. This provides detailed insight into the calculation of common cost factors, clarifying the basis for costs such as flight hours, ship operating hours, and vehicle operating costs. With analytic advancements, the Colombian government can now forecast the long-term costs of investment and planning decisions it makes.

Another important cultural transformation is the adoption of a strategic language that describes the challenges facing and capabilities possessed by the respective military services and the National Police in common terms. This common language has enabled the various actors within the system to communicate easily and with a common understanding. Moreover, political, military, and National Police leaders can now engage in and sustain professional discussions of emerging threats, operational concepts, and required capabilities, based on a common language.

## Elements of a Successful Partnership

The few institutional innovations described in this chapter, and many others within the Colombian defense sector, are accomplishments for which Colombia should be proud. They were creative, sustainable, and most importantly effective. As this chapter describes, they were not accomplished in a vacuum, but rather in partnership with the United States—primarily the DOD and U.S. armed forces. By definition, partnership implies that each partner is a part of a greater whole, dividing the weight of shared burdens. The success of the Colombia-U.S. partnership is due to a common perception of the shared burdens, mutual respect, trust in each other, reciprocal commitment, and frequent, if not constant, consultation.

### *Common Perceptions*

Prior to 9/11, the United States and Colombia were focused on separate goals with divergent objectives. For the United States, the metric of success in Colombia was a year-by-year decrease in coca cultivation and production; for Colombia, it was critical that the state recover municipalities and territories ceded to the insurgency during past administrations, stabilize the country, reduce crime, and defeat criminal organizations.

Plan Colombia helped to align the political and military objectives of both the United States and Colombia in the context of the post-9/11 world. The vision of Plan Colombia recognized the dual nature of the threat to Colombia's sovereignty—challenged both by leftist insurgents and by drug cartels—and the necessity for a multidimensional response. Plan Colombia acknowledged the root causes of conflict in the country, but under President Uribe's doctrine of democratic security, it prioritized national stabilization via a relentless pursuit of both the insurgents and the cartels. Once stabilized, the country could embark on a deeper examination of root causes and a program to promote economic development, democratic consolidation, and improved social integration. Both the United States and Colombia recognized the serious nature of the threat to both countries of a failing Colombia, and the national and international security implications of such a failure.

Ultimately leaders in both countries understood the need for a strategic approach beyond the brute application of military force. Plan Colombia addressed not only security—intelligence, special operations, human rights, and legitimacy training—but also justice. A significant effort to reform the Colombian justice system was supported by the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Agency for International Development.

### *Mutual Respect*

Colombia's historical military contributions fighting side-by-side with U.S. soldiers in Korea, Panama, and elsewhere, showcased the country's resolve and value as a U.S. partner. To further build upon this partnership, U.S. officers helped to establish the Lancero School in 1956, the Colombian equivalent of the U.S. Ranger School. From 1956 onward, U.S. advisors have visited Colombia on a regular basis, sharing their experience and expertise in military skills as well as institutional innovation. Colombian officers have attended the U.S. war colleges almost every year since.

Though the United States has worked with other regional partners, Colombia's military, police, and history of democratic governance made it an easy collaborator. When dealing with the Colombian military, the United States is dealing with equals. The Colombian armed forces lacked the necessary modern equipment, but overall were already well prepared for the requirements of modern defense institutions. The Colombian military is a mature force, with historic institutions and traditions, and a deeply held sense of military professionalism. This was not lost on U.S. military leaders, who have been constantly impressed with and respectful of the quality of their Colombian counterparts. Though they have benefited substantially from their partnership with the U.S. armed forces, the martial skills and capabilities of the Colombian military were never in question.

Likewise, the leadership of Colombia's armed forces has historically had profound respect for its U.S. counterparts, recognizing particularly that U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq provided invaluable experience in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.

### *Trust*

As Admiral William McCraven has often stated, "You can't surge trust." Trust between Colombia and the United States evolved along with the bilateral relationship itself, and over time became the predominant characteristic. For the United States, trusting Colombia means trusting Colombian leadership to embrace and defend the best interests of the Colombian people, and hemispheric security. It means further trusting Colombian insight into the nature of the country's challenges, rather than assuming U.S. experts have superior understanding. Far too frequently U.S. or other external experts presume they have a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by their partners than the partners themselves. Far too frequently external consultants respond to partner country challenges with strategic prescriptions and technical or financial fixes without understanding the underlying political dynamics. Trust overcomes this presumptive tendency.

The sustained U.S. commitment to Colombia, even after the United States was attacked by al Qaeda on 9/11, helped gain the trust of its Colombian counterparts. Successive senior ambassadors, combatant commanders, and officials in Washington have cultivated this trust-based relationship over multiple decades, constantly and consistently reinforcing it.

### *Shared Commitment*

Every country must own both the challenges to and the adaptations of its defense institutions. This has certainly been the case with Colombia. Plan Colombia was supported by the United States. From the beginning, the United States was a critical contributor, providing materiel assets such as helicopters, boats, and Coast Guard capabilities, as well as substantial financial support. These most certainly aided Colombian efforts to enhance military capabilities. Both countries in a defense institution building (DIB) partnership must have and demonstrate buy-in. From Colombia's viewpoint, ownership is a better description than buy-in.

In the United States, two factors secured its buy-in to DIB efforts in Colombia. First, stability in the Western Hemisphere was paramount; without a strengthened Colombia, the likelihood of a sizable country becoming a failed state was too costly to countenance. Second, a practical, but compelling, consideration was the troubling persistence and growth of the drug trade in the United States. The Clinton administration felt intense political pressure in the 1990s due to the emerging crack cocaine epidemic. Moreover, Colombia's cocaine industry had exported its violent consequences to U.S. cities.

A large part of this buy-in consisted of strong support in the U.S. Congress. Congressional support has been sustained, broad, and bipartisan. Many congressional visits by Colombian statesmen have reminded policymakers of the value of the partnership and the continuing U.S. commitment to Colombia. Meanwhile, Colombia has hosted many

visits by congressional members seeking first-hand observation and understanding of this critical strategic relationship. In 2016, the Obama administration proposed a \$450 million aid package called Peace Colombia, focusing on new multiyear initiatives to help Colombia win the peace. This high degree of buy-in by both countries reinforces trust and mutual respect while demonstrating sustained commitment to meeting the challenge.

### *Consultation*

Over the past several years, the Colombia-U.S. partnership has become close and taken on the character of an ongoing discussion. When any particular situation escalated, the Colombian MND could call the U.S. Ambassador, senior leaders within U.S. Southern Command, or the DOD. The two parties have had frank discussions as partners, not in an effort to produce the best optics for their respective offices but to determine what was needed and how to accomplish it. The tenor of dialogue has consistently been characterized by mutual respect and trust. There are always questions, discussions, concerns—a process of ongoing commitment to jointly meeting the challenges and resolving any emergent problems. Each has felt privileged and welcomed by the other to call any time an issue emerged, a privilege that has been taken advantage of on numerous occasions to the benefit of both the Colombia-U.S. partnership, as well as the security of Colombia, the United States, and the Western Hemisphere.

This chapter demonstrates the potential shared security benefits of a strong and carefully cultivated partnership. Colombia's history is as idiosyncratic as is that of the United States. There is no universal template for a DIB relationship. However, what can be derived from Colombia's experience is that a partnership based on a common perception of the threat environment, mutual respect, trust, shared commitment, and constant consultation provides the most conducive environment for successful DIB and that enduring institutional and cultural transformation of a country's defense sector may be among the benefits of such a partnership. In Colombia's case, this transformation permitted it to recover from near state collapse in 2000 to become the effective exporter of security that it has become. In the absence of any of these elements of a successful partnership, DIB is likely to be a frustrating experience for both parties.

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### Notes

1 The authors wish to acknowledge the outstanding reporting on DIB related projects in Colombia by Harold Laughlin of the Institute for Defense Analyses, and research assistance of NDU editorial assistants Clark Frye and Zaira Pirzada.

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