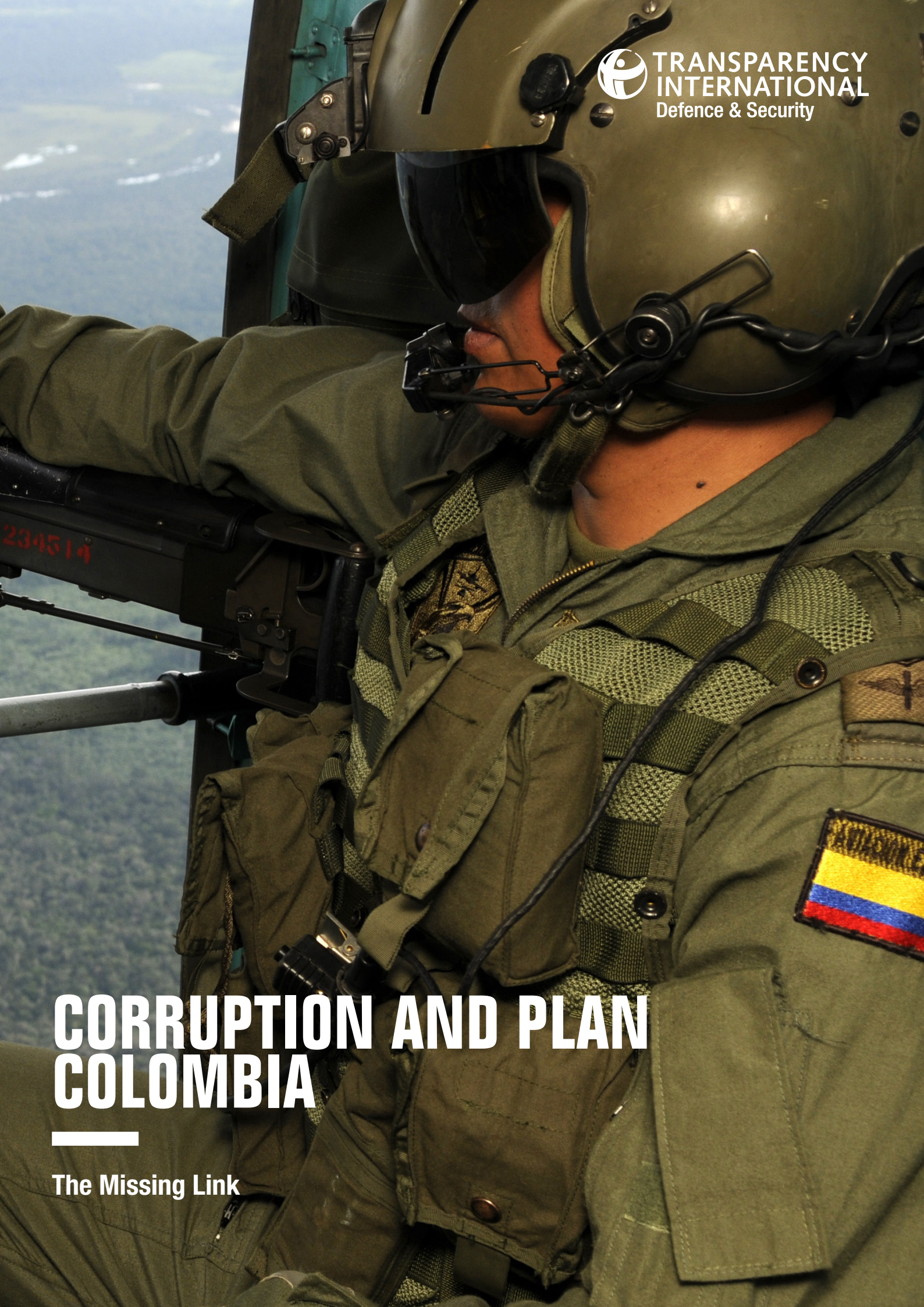

TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL
Defence & Security

CORRUPTION AND PLAN COLOMBIA

The Missing Link

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CORRUPTION AND PLAN COLOMBIA:

The Missing Link

SUMMARY

Plan Colombia – one of the largest security assistance programmes ever undertaken – is widely seen as successful. It helped construct modern, effective armed forces in Colombia capable of tackling the drug trafficking and insurgency threats. But what is usually overlooked is the link between the Plan and corruption issues: the impact that corruption had on the delivery and shape of the Plan, and the consequences the Plan had for manifestations of corruption in Colombia.

This paper traces the linkages between Plan Colombia and corrupt practices. We also track anti-corruption measures implemented by the donor and the recipient – both explicit and implicit within broader approaches – and their effects. Plan Colombia offers key lessons for mitigating the impact of corruption in security assistance programmes, including the use of conditionality; comprehensive investment in recipient institutional capacity; and the importance of host nation commitment and readiness to implement reforms.

The missions

Mission size: $10 billion in US assistance, chiefly defence equipment and training, through the duration of the programme. This expenditure was more than matched by Colombia's own investment into defence and security through increasing defence budgets and the imposition of a special 'democratic security tax'.

Mission duration: Plan Colombia was launched in 2000, with the bulk of assistance flowing in between 2000-2008. Follow-on programmes have lasted until the present day, and in 2017, with the signing of a peace agreement, they were succeeded by a new initiative, 'Peace Colombia'. However, as the history of US assistance to Colombia dates back to the 1970s, on occasion we include other events in the analysis.

Missions and anti-corruption: Plan Colombia, planned and executed jointly by Colombian and US authorities, contained very limited measures explicitly aimed at countering the impact of corruption. However, Plan design, including conditionality; overall efforts at increasing institutional capacity; and host nation commitment to anti-corruption and efficiency reforms in parallel with the Plan, meant that its implementation did have an impact on mitigating corruption risks in Colombian defence and security institutions.

Selected corruption pathways and consequences for the mission

- **Links with criminal and insurgent organisations:** Plan Colombia involved partnering with a force whose links to drug cartels and paramilitaries, motivated by both need and greed, affected its effectiveness and legitimacy. On occasion, these links not only adversely affected the goals of the Colombian and US governments, but also directly threatened the safety of US and Colombian personnel.

- **Abuse of the civilian population:** During the civil war, the Colombian armed forces at times inflated the results of their campaigns against FARC insurgents and drug traffickers. The most egregious manifestation was the phenomenon of 'false positives', the extrajudicial killing of civilians by soldiers or by criminals they hired in order to present the bodies as guerrillas or criminals killed in combat. The phenomenon of false positives is widely linked to the pressure the Uribe government placed on the Colombian military to achieve results, and the personal benefits for personnel who were considered effective.

Efforts to mitigate corruption

- **Choice of host nation partners:** in Colombia, the US found a partner committed to the implementation of reforms, and to making changes that would enable it to use US assistance more effectively. While the political and material impact of US assistance did create perceived problems for Colombia's national sovereignty, overall the host and donor nations largely shared the same goals and were prepared to make sacrifices to achieve them.

- **Applying conditionality:** Conditionality in the implementation of Plan Colombia created pressure to address corruption and human rights abuses in Colombian defence and security forces. The Plan also provided political 'cover' for host nation reformers wishing to tackle embedded interests and practices that enabled corruption.

- **Eliminating need:** One key lesson of Plan Colombia is that withholding resources in response to corruption is not always the right choice. For Colombian defence and security forces, an increase in resources, training and support provided room for manoeuvre that encouraged them – in some cases – to cut ties with paramilitaries and drug cartels. Coupled with pressure to reform and transfer of know-how, greater availability of resources helped curtail incentives to engage in corrupt practices.

- **Modern resource management:** Plan Colombia's ability to deliver equipment directly rather than through Colombian procurement systems (a modality used in most US assistance programmes) reduced the risk of diversion. The donations of materiel also created a requirement and an incentive to introduce modern resource management systems, enabling real-time tracking of materiel and better accounting for its placement and use.

- **Training and mentoring:** Training and education provided by the US did not focus exclusively on combat capacity, but also on institutional reform, helping introduce processes that reduce the space for corruption. Operational training in, for example, maintenance, has also helped reduce corruption risks by bringing more work in-house and shortening supply chains.

CORRUPTION: THE MISSING LINK?

> [I]n Colombia, there is a lot of analysis on Plan Colombia, but not of corruption. It's an issue that isn't aired in public, but was key in US-Colombia relations.[1]
>
> **Diana Rojas, Colombian academic**

Plan Colombia – at $10 billion of US funding between 2000-2016, one of the largest security assistance programmes ever undertaken[2] – is widely seen as a success. It helped create modern, effective armed forces in Colombia, and address the threats from drug trafficking and insurgency. What is usually overlooked, however, is the link between the Plan and corruption issues: the impact that corruption had on the delivery and shape of the Plan, and the consequences the Plan had for manifestations of corruption in Colombia. In the extensive literature that has been published on Plan Colombia, which offers in-depth analysis of other challenges – for example on human rights – the issue of defence sector corruption is notable by its absence.

There is perhaps a good reason for this: compared to many other recipients of US security assistance, Colombia posed a lower corruption risk and had more effective armed forces, which had already begun to implement defence integrity measures. In addition, the dual threat from drug smugglers and insurgents, which had a regional impact, was significant enough to eclipse other issues. During the implementation of Plan Colombia, concerns about human rights abuses on the part of the military – especially in connection with anti-cartel and anti-insurgent operations – overshadowed other concerns and directed national and international attention away from corruption risks.

But corruption, integrity and defence governance shortfalls did affect the Colombian defence and security forces, and were intertwined with the security assistance offered to Colombia. The policy and analytical focus on drug smuggling and human right issues obscured the importance of corrupt practices, which were often inextricably linked to human rights abuses, and in some cases inadvertently fuelled by security assistance efforts. From procurement to links with traffickers to private enrichment motivations at the root of human rights abuses, the impact of corruption is unmistakable. Moreover, the network of links between organised crime and actors in the conflict – many of whom fund themselves through the drug trade, to varying degrees – means that criminal acts committed for political purposes can be hard to distinguish from those carried out for personal gain.

> 'In the case of Colombia, human rights violations are often directly related to, or directly caused by, corruption issues … [sometimes] it's not about political opposition, it's about covering up corruption activity, money laundering, or illegal business.'[3]
>
> **Former US Official**

However, the history of Plan Colombia and the reform of the Colombian armed forces during its implementation period offer key lessons for how to mitigate and address corruption risks when building up partner capacity. Host nation commitment to security assistance programmes and to mitigating the impact of corruption; use of conditionality and cross-government cooperation within the donor government; and application of monitoring and oversight measures helped diminish the prevalence and impact of corruption, and enabled better absorption of security assistance.

This paper, based on extensive desk research and more than 40 interviews with Colombian and US analysts and personnel, former and current, involved in the planning and implementation of Plan Colombia, analyses the corruption issues linked to Plan Colombia; the impact of the Plan on manifestations of corruption; and the anti-corruption safeguards that curtailed the reach and severity of corruption. It is our hope that lessons learned from Plan Colombia can be applied to other security assistance programmes, helping to reduce the impact of corruption and to build effective defence and security forces. As Colombia moves away from internal conflict and develops plans to contribute to regional security and international peacekeeping operations, its experience in improving defence governance and addressing corruption in internal military operations is likely to prove useful to other countries wishing to do the same.

Security assistance and corruption: providing one, avoiding the other

Throughout the history of US-Colombia military relations – close since the Korean war, and bolstered by the Colombian military's desire to adopt some of the US military's practices – defence corruption and integrity were factors shaping the modalities of US engagement and assistance programmes. Washington began sending teams to advise Colombia's military on its internal conflict as far back as 1958, recommending a programme of reforms to the security forces.[4] Issues

around integrity, competence, and the human rights record of the Colombian armed forces and government officials, however, have recurred, and played a part the design of US assistance. The link between integrity and effectiveness was made early on, and although it did not always override security considerations, it was a significant factor in shaping US programmes.

For example, military and political relations went into crisis under the administration of President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998), whose campaign reportedly accepted funds from the Cali Cartel. As a result, in 1996 and 1997, the US 'decertified' Colombia as a cooperating partner on drug policy, delaying or cancelling assistance on the grounds of widespread corruption that undermined the work of law enforcement and the judiciary.[5] The US set out several conditions that Colombia had to meet in order to be recertified, including addressing public sector corruption.[6]

Publicly, the US focused on corruption among the political leadership rather than the security forces.[7] However, concerns about the Colombian armed forces played a part in the decision to limit assistance. As the chief of the US military's Southern Command told Congress in 1998, 'the performance of the Colombian military to date provides little cause for optimism', citing the armed forces' inability to assess and respond to threats.[8] In the late 1990s, both the Defence Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department worried that the army's poor leadership, training and equipment did not bode well for the army's ability to counter internal threats.[9] Meanwhile, human rights organisations – and some members of the US Congress – urged the US government to limit funding on the basis of the military's record of abuses.[10] In two diplomatic cables from 1997, US Ambassador Myles Frechette advised against assisting the military's anti-guerrilla operations due to human right concerns, and cited 'pervasive corruption' in the military – from procurement to ties with criminal groups – as a key concern.'[11]

> 'Colombia's problem is not paucity of resources. It is the misapplication of them and a still considerable degree of corruption within the military.' [12]
>
> **Former State Department official, 2000**

The US did not trust some of those at the top of the Colombian army at the time – such as General Hernando Zúñiga and General Iván Ramírez – because of their suspected ties to the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC).[13] However, the air force and navy, which had little role in fighting the rebels, were considered better in terms of integrity, and continued to receive US aid.[14] Meanwhile, the police leadership was immensely popular in Washington, and the national police were seen as a relatively clean and attractive partner after working alongside the US government for more than a decade to defeat the Medellín and Cali Cartels. As a result, much security aid was redirected to the national police in the early and mid-1990s – particularly its counter-narcotics force, the DIRAN.[15] In 1992, the US shifted $75 million in aid from the military to the police, amid concerns that the military was using aid intended for counter-narcotics efforts to fight its war on the insurgents.[16]

Despite US concerns about the Colombian armed forces, the perception of a two-pronged threat emanating from Colombia's drug cartels and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels meant that US military assistance never stopped completely. Special forces still trained Colombian troops[17] and arms transfers continued.[18] By 1997 the US had agreed to increase military assistance, amid concerns about Colombia's worsening security and the need for greater force as the paramilitaries and guerrillas took on an increasing role in the drug trade, and the FARC increased their control of territory and successfully attacked military bases.[19] While the US did not re-certify Colombia as a partner, due to its failure to root out 'narco-corruption', President Bill Clinton issued a waiver on national security grounds, releasing $30 million in military assistance that had been suspended under the 1996 decertification.[20]

The election of President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) was met with a sense of relief in Washington, as his clean reputation promised a greater congruence of interests in fighting the drug trade.[21] Four months after Pastrana's inauguration, the two countries announced the creation of a bilateral task force to help modernise the Colombian military, as well as a new counter-narcotics unit within the Colombian army.[22] This increasing cooperation set the stage for Plan Colombia.

The birth of Plan Colombia

In 1999, the Pastrana administration produced a broad proposal to improve the country's security by dismantling trafficking groups, strengthening the judicial system, and promoting alternative development in drug producing areas – known as 'Plan Colombia'. It set the goal of reducing drug production by 50 percent in six years.[23] According to the Colombian ambassador to Washington, 75 percent of the $7.5 billion total would be made up of alternative development and institutional reform programmes, while the military component would make up just 25 percent.[24]

In response to the Colombian proposal, the Clinton administration set out a new assistance package in support of Plan Colombia. In 2000, Congress approved a bill to give $1.3 billion in counter-narcotics aid to the Andean region over two years, with some $860 million of it to Colombia.[25] The composition of the programme, though, was reversed: some 75 percent of the funding

was assistance to the military and police, with only 25 percent designated for development programmes.[26] These proportions would change little over the next 15 years – a total of $9.94 billion went to Colombia between 2000 and 2016, 71 percent of it to the police and military.[27] Within the package, $517 million was earmarked for the armed forces (two-thirds of it dedicated to supplying helicopters) and $116 million for the police.[28] The overwhelming emphasis on military aid meant that the Plan, originally intended as multi-donor, turned into a chiefly US-Colombian affair, as other donors became uneasy about lack of emphasis on development.[29]

In theory, Plan Colombia aid could at first only be used to combat the drug trade, which was the primary responsibility of the police. However, there was in reality no sharp division between counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency efforts, both because of guerrilla involvement in the drug trade, and because of the need for the army to support the police's operations against traffickers in inaccessible areas.[30] In 2002, after several years of attempts to distinguish between the two, the US government allowed Colombia to use US funds against insurgents, controversially rebranding the FARC as 'narcoguerrillas'.[31] There was a degree of compromise on both sides, according to one Colombian security expert: the US 'accepted the close relationship between the guerrillas and drug trafficking, and the Colombian government accepted that the armed forces would take part in fighting drug trafficking.'[32]

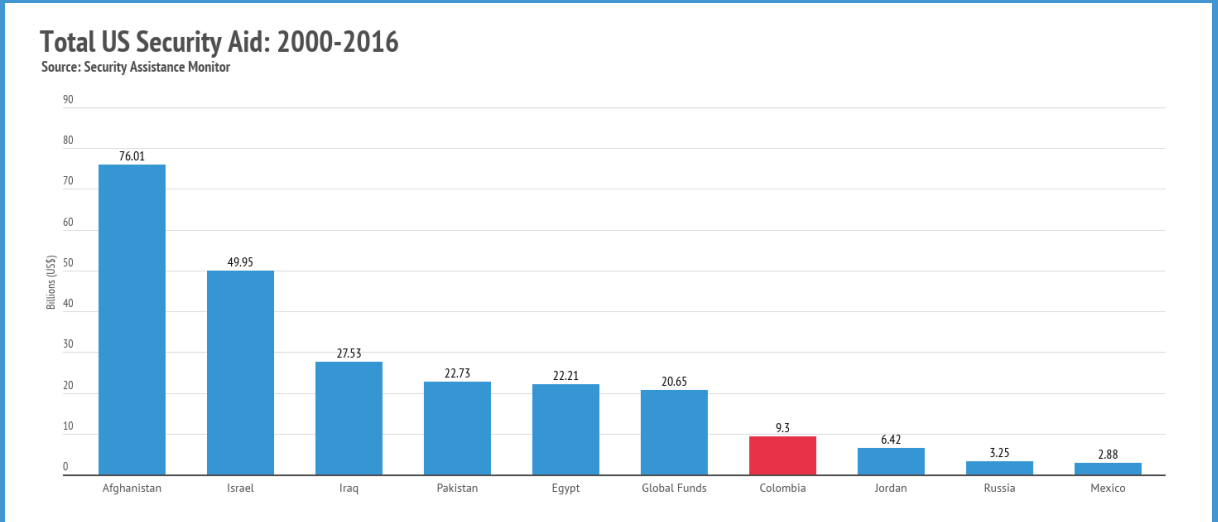
There is debate over how far the Plan was the work of the Colombian government, and how far it was imposed by the US. Proponents of the latter theory point out that the definitive version of Plan Colombia, circulated in September 1999, appeared in English some months before it appeared in Spanish.[33] However, many US interviewees stressed Colombia's national ownership of the initiative, from financial contributions to commitment, political will, and sacrifice. As one former official put it:

> In Colombia, we found a partner that truly wanted this. We gave strong technical and financial support, but at the end of the day it was the Colombians that put in the bulk of the blood and treasure.[34]
>
> **Francisco Mora, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere, 2009-2013**

Recipient nation initiative and ownership was crucial. It signified a commonality of interests and commitment that would help absorb the assistance and push through the necessary institutional reforms. It has been one of the most important safeguards against corruption and waste of funds.

US security assistance to Colombia

Colombia was the sixth greatest recipient of US security aid worldwide in the period 2000 to 2016, though the sums are dwarfed by those of US assistance to Afghanistan and Israel, at $76 billion and $50 billion, respectively. Iraq, Pakistan and Egypt all received more than double the total aid that went to Colombia in that period.[30]



Corruption risks and Plan Colombia

When Plan Colombia was launched, the Colombian military had for some years been taking gradual steps towards greater transparency and accountability. In 1991, the new constitution mandated that there should be a civilian minister of defence, ending four decades in which military personnel had held the office uninterrupted and – while largely refraining from political interference – enjoyed a broad autonomy over the armed forces' functioning.[35]

During the Plan Colombia years, defence sector corruption risks broadly declined, although some – including corruption in procurement, misuse of classified intelligence spending, links with criminal organisations, and falsification of 'body counts' – remained serious or peaked during the period. The implementation of the Plan also created opportunities for corruption in US forces, though these were low level and did not threaten the overall implementation of the Plan.

Resource diversion and corruption and asset management

There have been longstanding problems around the embezzlement of funds by Colombian military and police personnel, especially through the procurement process. A 1996 US diplomatic cable sets out the details of a procurement scandal, commenting that the Colombian military 'has a long history of corruption in its procurement contracting.'[36] Similar problems have affected the police – a 2013 study describes backhanders paid to police personnel to influence selection for public contracts as a costly, secretive form of corruption lining the pockets of senior personnel.

> '…[A] large proportion of high-ranking officers like police generals and colonels would have considerable difficulty justifying their wealth.'[37]
>
> **Juan Carlos Ruiz Vásquez, 'Colombian police under fire', 2013**

In 2002, a series of reforms centralising defence procurement lessened corruption risks around high-value items, but risks remained around some lower-value ones, especially for military units in more remote areas, which are dependent on local suppliers.[38] A former Colombian official suggested the reforms had been limited to avoid resistance: '[President Álvaro] Uribe allowed the military to manage small contracts like food, while tanks and other big purchases went through civilian controls. We still have problems with corruption, but not as much.'[39]

Some interviewees commented that the large increase in the defence budget that accompanied Plan Colombia increased the risk of corruption in procurement contracts, even if only in terms of the volume of money available to be embezzled.[40] In 2014, a scandal around alleged procurement corruption led to the removal of the chief of the armed forces and five other generals. Semana, an influential Colombian magazine, published recordings of conversations between military officers, apparently discussing schemes to gain kickbacks of up to half the value of contracts through army purchases. In response, the Defence Minister announced that all army aviation procurement would be centralised within ministry structures, as possible irregularities had been found in that area.[41]

Misuse of defence funds: 'confidential expenses'

With an increase in defence spending and in security assistance came an increased focus on intelligence work and the expanded use of informants, meant to help dismantle trafficking and insurgent networks.[42] According to interviewees, this resulted in increasing amounts spent in the form of 'confidential expenses' ('gastos reservados'). The category covers spending on intelligence and counter-intelligence operations, and the protection of witnesses and informants. A Colombian expert cited this type of spending as a corruption risk, stating that, with Plan Colombia, confidential expenses came to be used 'for all types of decisions. Commanders started to appear with farms, to retire to big houses, when their salary is not that big.'[43]

Confidential expenses make up a small proportion of total defence spending, at around 0.5 percent of the security forces' budget in 2005, and a similar proportion in recent years.[44] In 2017, a total of 128 billion pesos (£33 million) was spent on confidential expenses, much of it by bodies outside the defence sector: a third was spent by the police, and just 17 percent by the army.[45] However, the lack of transparency around these funds has been associated with high corruption risks. In 2003, two generals – the former head of army intelligence and the commander of the Medellín police – were forced to retire amid accusations that they had misused these expenses.[46] In late 2017 and early 2018, Semana magazine reported that there had been significant diversions of confidential expenses by military personnel. According to the magazine, an internal Defence Ministry investigation found that some 1 billion pesos (£260,000) had been stolen every two months.[47]

Confidential expenses have been linked to one of the grisliest forms of defence sector corruption during the Plan Colombia years: the extrajudicial killings of civilians to boost kill counts (see below). There have been allegations that money spent under this heading was used to pay off soldiers accused of 'false positive' killings,[48] in order to buy their silence, and to pay for their legal defence.[49] A

UN report on the killings noted that confidential expenses were a 'serious concern', as they could be used to pay 'recruiters' to find victims. Informants could earn rewards for identifying supposed guerrillas or criminals to the security forces, sometimes paid at the discretion of commanders, with little oversight.[50]

Links with criminal organisations: traffickers and paramilitaries

> [in the Colombian armed forces] 'most corruption involved taking money from narco-traffickers or paramilitaries, not taking money from the till'.[51]
>
> US Official

In the Colombian context, the massive power to corrupt that is wielded by organised criminal groups poses a more serious risk of corruption to the defence sector than the misuse of funds. This risk takes two, closely related, forms: links with drug traffickers, and links with paramilitary organisations.

The roots of the armed forces' links with illegal groups are complex and show that monetary or financial gain is not the only driver of corrupt practices. In Colombia's case, paucity of resources and threats to personal safety of troops could drive corruption as much as the lure of personal gain. In 1990, US officials defended the provision of aid to the Andean region, worrying that depriving an already overstretched force of resources would lead to more, rather than less, corruption and human rights abuses.

> '[A]n impoverished, poorly-trained and -equipped military, unable to feed its troops, is far more susceptible to corruption and human rights abuses.' [52]
>
> Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Affairs, 1990

The security forces and narco-infiltration

The huge profits offered by the drug trade, combined with the serious threat to troops' safety, present a significant corruption risk for members of the security forces.[53]

> 'In the regions where the state doesn't have territorial control, if you don't cooperate with narco-traffickers you and your family will be threatened. This has decreased with improvements in security.[54]
>
> Colombian academic

Cooperation with traffickers would take the form of tacit or explicit agreements not to pursue traffickers or to avoid patrolling in areas where a drug shipment is passing through, or – more actively – passing intelligence to traffickers, including information on security forces' movements and on their sources of information. One former US official observed that narco-corruption was a huge issue at the lower levels in the armed forces during the Plan Colombia period,[55] while a 1995 US Government Accountability Office report notes that the US authorities at that time refused to share certain information with the Colombian government for fear of corrupt elements compromising the intelligence and exposing informants to danger.[56]

Susceptibility to criminal infiltration differs across the various branches of the security forces, though other factors, including location and the tone set by a unit's leadership, also matter. In particular, the risk of corruption increases with exposure to organised criminal networks, making personnel deployed to fight these groups the most vulnerable. As the frontline force in combating the drug trade, the police run the highest risk. Manifestations of police corruption include the import and transportation of 'precursor' chemicals used in the drug trade.[57]

The air force, with limited exposure to direct contact with traffickers, is considered the least vulnerable to infiltration – though there are cases of personnel allegedly using military planes to traffic drugs.[58] The navy, more vulnerable to infiltration, has seen officers leaking information about Colombian and US naval patrols to traffickers. A 2007 investigation found that drug traffickers were working with a series of small groups within the navy, who were not aware of one another's identity, bribing them in exchange for information on patrol schedules.[59]

The greater role of the Colombian armed forces in fighting the drug trade from the late 1990s onwards – as encouraged by the US – increased their contact with traffickers, and therefore the risk of corruption.[60] A former commander of the army's counter-narcotics brigade pinpointed particular vulnerabilities for those serving in Colombia's remote border regions. As these are key points for drugs and other contraband to leave and enter the country, criminal groups often attempt to control them. The security forces can be vulnerable to attack if they do not cooperate, and in a position to make great financial gains if they do. Transparency and accountability is therefore particularly important for units serving in remote regions, the commander explained.[61]

Elements in the army have been found to provide services for drug traffickers, such as protecting their areas of production, and supplying permits for precursor chemicals and gasoline.[62] A 2018 UN report warned that corrupt activities by members of the Colombian armed forces could economically empower criminal groups, highlighting allegations that members of the military facilitated criminal activities including fuel smuggling, cocaine production and

illegal mining. It found that 'high levels of impunity' had encouraged these practices to continue.[63]

A case of narco-infiltration that drew particular attention in the US was the 2006 killing of 10 elite US-trained counter-narcotics police officers and an informant in the region of Jamundí, in western Colombia. They had been ambushed and gunned down by an army unit, which was apparently in the pay of a criminal group. Fifteen soldiers were convicted over the incident, with the investigation eventually leading prosecutors to uncover a ring of current and former army officers working for the Norte del Valle Cartel.[64] Infiltration, then-Defence Minister Juan Manuel Santos said, had reached the highest levels of the army.[65]

> 'This was not a mistake … The army was doing the bidding of drug traffickers'.[66]
>
> **Colombian Attorney General Mario Iguarán, 2006**

There was anger over the incident in the US, with the media and government departments worrying that the case showed continued ties between the Colombian military and drug traffickers.[67] In the US Congress, 174 representatives supported an unsuccessful measure to cut aid to the Colombian security forces.[68]

> 'We are sending billions of dollars to bank-roll the Colombian military and are being told everything is terrific. And then bang, this happens. Just how far have the drug mafias penetrated the military?'[69]
>
> **Rep. Jim McGovern (D) of Massachusetts, 2006**

Links with paramilitaries

The ties between elements within the security forces and paramilitary groups are a less straightforward manifestation of corruption than ties with traffickers, but one that had an important impact on US assistance to Colombia. The paramilitary groups arose in the 1980s, some as local self-defence organisations against traffickers and FARC rebels, and others as the private armies of drug traffickers; by 1996, they had formed a federation, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC).[70] The group mutated into a major drug trafficker and participant in the conflict, responsible for massacres and displacement on a large scale. In 2001, the US named it as a terrorist organisation, citing its responsibility for kidnappings and mass killings.[71] An independent Colombian commission has found that the paramilitaries committed nearly 60 percent of all massacres in Colombia between 1980 and 2012, and nearly 40 percent of the individual assassinations.[72]

While cooperation with paramilitaries was never an official army policy, some units and individuals nonetheless chose to tolerate their presence or even work with them – especially in the remote areas where the FARC had grown particularly strong.[73] Faced with two armed groups – the rebels, who actively launched attacks against the armed forces, and the paramilitaries, who mostly attacked the rebels – some commanders simply focused on the rebels. At the other end of the spectrum, some worked closely with the paramilitaries, facilitating their atrocities against the civilian population. A Colombian government investigation found that, in the late 1990s, some army commanders 'shared intelligence, planned and carried out joint operations, provided weapons and munitions, supported with helicopters and medical aid, and coordinated on a day to day basis.'[74]

This cooperation can be attributed in part to members of the armed forces seeking to gain an advantage against the rebels, and trying to make up for resource shortfalls. CIA intelligence reports in 1997 and 1998 noted that members of the security forces were propelled to work with the paramilitaries by 'deficiencies in manpower, transport and tactics,' by the perception that the military was losing the war against the guerrillas,[75] and by the sense that the civilian government did not support their efforts.[76] Before Plan Colombia, resources were so low that units often lacked the mobility to pursue armed groups. One security expert noted that some units only had the resources to move a maximum of three days each month, and were forced to rely on contributions from local businesses to pay for their petrol – something that helped fuel the alliance with the paramilitaries.[77]

But personal gain was also a significant driver. Elements in the armed forces would take money from paramilitaries to assist with their drug trafficking operations, for example by agreeing not to carry out patrols at certain times and places. Other commanders accepted payments from paramilitary leaders in exchange for their support.[78] Military officers waved paramilitary groups through roadblocks, shared intelligence, and supplied them with ammunition.[79]

> 'Very few soldiers saw it as patriotic, most did it for money.'[80]
>
> **Colombian army Colonel (ret'd)**

After the demobilisation of the AUC paramilitary umbrella group in the mid-2000s, new armed groups arose, known by the authorities as 'criminal bands' or 'BACRIM' in Spanish. These paramilitary successor groups maintain alliances with elements in the security forces, but generally at a lower level, and in a more localised way.[81]

> 'Their strategy is to buy off the local authorities. There is lots of bribery at the local level; this is the new corruption threat.'[82]
>
> **Colombian analyst**

This form of corruption was less visible to Colombia's foreign partners because it mostly took place at the lower levels in the Colombian security forces and in remote areas, on the borders and coasts.[83] Ties to drug trafficking groups are a 'constant problem' in Colombia, as one former US official stated.[84] The US military's perception, however, was that although they did provide training at that level, lack of involvement of the 'big guys' and absence of direct funding for these units meant this was not a direct risk to security assistance.[85]

Abuse of civilian population: false 'body counts'

During the civil war, the Colombian armed forces at times inflated the results of their campaigns against FARC insurgents and drug traffickers. The most significant, and egregious, manifestation was the phenomenon of 'false positives', i.e. the extrajudicial killing of civilians by soldiers, or by criminals they hired, in order to present their bodies as guerrillas or criminals killed in combat. The UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions found that these killings were committed across the country by a large number of different military units, concluding that the number of incidents and the similarities between them made it unlikely that they were carried out by rogue soldiers or units.[86]

The phenomenon of false positives is widely linked – including by the Special Rapporteur, and by former US officials interviewed for this report – to the pressure the Uribe government placed on the Colombian military to achieve results. Some analysts link this to the need to justify US security assistance, describing it as a 'perverse aspect' of the mentality around Plan Colombia.[87] For Colombian academic Diana Rojas, the killings were a perverse effect of the 'efficiency measures' imposed by the US: 'How can you show results? You need to have figures.'[88] As the US Congressional Research Service has noted, the majority of the cases occurred between 2004 and 2008, when US assistance was at its peak.[89] The practice itself, however, predated the introduction of Plan Colombia, and so did the US awareness of it: as far back as 1990, a US Embassy cable described an incident where the Colombian investigation 'strongly suggests' that the army had executed nine people – reported to be members of a single family – before dressing them in military fatigues, and reporting them as guerrillas killed in combat.[90]

Due to the US Congress and NGO community's focus on human rights abuses in Colombia – driven by outrage at the violence – extrajudicial killings were seen almost exclusively through this lens. But, as some interviewees pointed out, this perspective has led to a neglect of certain factors driving the killings – namely as the pursuit of personal gain.[91] Retired Colonel Alfonso Velásquez described false positives as 'classic cases of corruption,' where officials used their prerogatives to gain personal benefit: 'Successful military commanders – evaluated by body count – get prizes, courses in the US, which aren't just a chance to travel but a better salary.'[92]

> False positives often had 'nothing to do with wanting to kill the FARC – it was being unscrupulous about what they did to get rewarded […] People focused on it as a political human rights violation, but it was really about getting rewarded materially and otherwise, rather than political motives.'[93]
>
> **Former US official**

The military's rapid growth under Plan Colombia also contributed to the killings. A group of US economists have analysed the data and concluded that there were more false positives in areas where the local military units were headed by colonels, rather than generals. They link this to the expansion of the military, which nearly tripled in numbers between 2002 and 2010, creating a shortfall of high-ranking officers to lead units and causing the army to place colonels in charge of brigades. These colonels – unlike the generals who normally led brigades – were up for promotion. The step was a particularly difficult one in the Colombian army, the paper argues, giving colonels greater incentives to demand results from their troops at any cost.[94]

Some false positive killings were carried out in partnership with criminal groups or paramilitaries, who would provide corpses of rebels or civilians that could be presented by the army as combatants, in exchange for weapons and ammunition.[95] In some cases, criminal groups 'would kill their rivals and give them to the army'.[96] Interviewees from the Colombian defence sector also stressed the criminal over the political aspect of the killings, with former Vice-Minister of Defence Alejandro Arbeláez stating that infiltration by organised crime had co-opted a small part of military institutions, using them to kill their enemies. One former military officer similarly said that there had been some cases of false positives, which were carried out in cooperation with criminal groups.[97]

However, some interviewees from Colombian civil society argued that the killings had less to do with organised crime than with the longer-standing practice of 'social cleansing,' in which members of the security forces murdered people who were considered undesirable, such as drug users, alcoholics, and petty criminals. One former Defence Ministry official noted that the explosion of false positive cases in the 2000s was due not so much to an increase in the killings, which had been going on for 30 years, but to a greater ability to track what army units were doing – linked

to the reforms that accompanied Plan Colombia: 'From 2006 onwards, thanks to the military reforms, you could count where the money was going and what units were doing,' allowing the Defence Ministry leadership to crack down on the practice.[98]

Identifying false positives: indicators and warnings

Human rights organisations had reported false positive cases for many years – particularly after 2004, when they began to take place with a 'disturbing frequency.'[99] There were cases where the wounds of alleged combatants did not match the bullet holes in their uniforms, or where the victims were too old, young, or physically or mentally impaired to be credible combatants. NGOs have highlighted implausible circumstances, such as victims bearing weapons that did not work, or that were too light to use in an attack against soldiers; or where high numbers of combat kills were reported by units not dedicated to combat, or stationed in areas where guerrillas were not present.[100] After years in which the authorities largely brushed off the claims, the issue became an international scandal in September 2008, when the Colombian media reported on the case of 11 young men from Soacha, on the outskirts of Bogotá.[101] Their bodies were found in a mass grave in the north of the country, recorded by the army as deaths in combat. They had died within days of being reported missing. Their families denied that the men had any connection with armed groups. By October, President Uribe had been forced to dismiss 25 members of the military, including four generals.[102] Prosecutors have so far investigated more than 3,000 cases, though a recent estimate put the number of dead at 10,000.[103]

Efforts to cover up false positive killings have spurred further corruption within the armed forces. The 2014 scandal around kickbacks in army procurement contracts included alleged discussions of payments to officers who had been convicted, or charged with, false positive killings, in order to buy their silence and protect senior officers. The commander of the army was dismissed after Semana magazine published recordings in which he advises a colonel, who was under investigation for the killings, to 'form a mafia' against those investigating them.[104]

There has been debate in Colombia around whether military personnel accused of false positive killings should be included in transitional justice arrangements, as part of the peace deal with the FARC rebels. Some human rights groups have argued against this, on the grounds that the killings were not part of the armed conflict, but rather were carried out for personal gain.[105] If the cases are included in the deal, it could result in reduced or non-custodial sentences for soldiers who carried out false positive killings, and even the release of those who have already been convicted.

Corruption in US forces

The wide-ranging presence of US forces in Colombia during the implementation of Plan Colombia created opportunities for private enrichment, mostly related to participation in the drug trade. In 1999, the wife of the commander of the US military group in Bogotá was charged with sending cocaine and heroin to New York through the diplomatic mail service. She was sentenced to five years, while her husband, an army colonel, was sentenced to five months for failing to report her activities.[106] In 2005, four US soldiers were convicted of a conspiracy to smuggle cocaine from Colombia to the US on a military aircraft, and another smuggling attempt by a Special Forces soldier was uncovered in 2018.[107] There have also been allegations that US personnel in Colombia have been responsible for sexual abuse of minors, though no prosecutions have been carried out.[108]

None of the US personnel suspected of criminal activity have faced prosecution in Colombia. The suspects in the 2005 case were not extradited to Colombia, thanks to a bilateral agreement granting full diplomatic immunity to US soldiers in the country.[109] That same year, two members of the US army Special Forces were arrested by the Colombian police on charges of plotting to sell ammunition – supplied through Plan Colombia – to paramilitary groups. The men were transferred to the US, despite objections from some Colombian authorities.[110]

Following the 2005 arrests, Colombian legislators sought, unsuccessfully, to have the bilateral agreement on immunity renegotiated.[111] US Ambassador William Wood rejected attempts to have US personnel tried in Colombia, stating that they would face justice in the US, and that 'we do not tolerate corruption.'[112]

ANTI-CORRUPTION MEASURES IN PLAN COLOMBIA

While corruption risks clearly affected both the Colombian military and Plan Colombia activities, the Plan had a limited focus on corruption. The original Plan Colombia documents did include a range of anti-corruption measures, but these were mostly not targeted at the armed forces. For example, the Clinton administration proposal from 2000 discusses 'increased training for the police, prosecutors and judges' in corruption, human rights, and money laundering, but only includes a single mention of a Defense Department programme 'to eliminate corruption and human rights violations in the Colombian military'.[113] The Pastrana administration's 1999 proposal addresses corruption risks in more detail, warning that 'the proceeds of drug trafficking have corrupted officials in all branches of government.' It sets out to tackle corruption and strengthen the judiciary, and notes that that success requires 'reforms at the very heart of our institutions, in particular, in our military.'[114]

Current and former US officials confirmed that the issue of defence sector corruption played a limited role in Plan Colombia. One factor behind this lack of focus on corruption may simply be that the risk was lower in Colombia than in some other recipients of US security assistance. Corruption did not pose a significant challenge to security cooperation under Plan Colombia, according to former Southern Command chief General James Hill.[115] Several US interviewees emphasised the positive contrast between Colombia and other recipients, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and countries in Central America. As one official explained, 'We don't have a better host country government partner in any crisis account – in terms of political will, budget largesse – no one comes close.'[116]

> 'We simply were not that significantly concerned about corruption. Human rights was a different issue, but we didn't see that those resources were being used for things other than their stated purpose.'[117]
>
> **Francisco Mora, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere (2009-2013)**

Others suggested that anti-corruption measures introduced by the Colombian government had mitigated the risks before Plan Colombia started, and showed that the government was committed to rooting out corruption that undermined security and facilitated cartel

operations.[118] Once President Samper – who was accused of accepting donations from drug cartels – left office, corruption ceased to be a major issue in US-Colombian relations, and the US praised the transformation of the Colombian state.[119]

The issue of corruption in the defence and security forces also lacked public attention within Colombia. A combination of the traditional autonomy of the military; strong regional influences on Colombian institutions that have tended to minimise the significance of central government departments; and lack of interest (sometimes motivated by fear of reprisals) on the part of academia and civil society have meant that questions affecting the armed forces were not widely discussed. Even as the 'civilianisation' and reform process went on, the military retained a significant degree of autonomy.[120]

> 'The theme of corruption in the armed forces isn't aired much because it is a closed institution, it defends its image. Since Plan Colombia it has been more open, but before that they would deal with things internally.' [121]
>
> **Diana Rojas, Colombian researcher**

Another significant reason for corruption receiving relatively little attention was the focus among some US policymakers on human right issues within Colombia's defence and security institutions.[122] The severity of the human rights violations in the context of the country's conflict over decades meant that the cause had garnered strong defenders in US civil society and in Congress, and there was concern in the US government that reports of abuses would undermine public and congressional support for security cooperation with Colombia.[123]

> 'There were eyes on the Hill and in the NGO community calling us to task if and when there were human rights violations. It was not the same at all with the issue of corruption…Over time the issue of human rights remained, if not increased, while the issue of corruption became less important.'[124]
>
> **Francisco Mora, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere (2009–2013)**

Nonetheless, some features of Plan Colombia – from its design and delivery modalities to focus on institutional improvement and use of conditionality – have reduced the incidence and impact of corruption. Some of these measures were implemented by the donor, while others were spearheaded by the recipient nation as part of a broader effort to reform and modernise its armed forces. Both are important: they suggest not only potential donor courses of action, but also the importance of the choice of partners and their readiness to implement the changes necessary to take advantage of security assistance programmes.

Choosing partners: host nation commitment and reforms

Defence reforms undertaken by the Colombian government both prior to and during Plan Colombia illustrate the importance of choosing partners who are motivated to reform and are prepared to build institutions that can absorb security assistance programming. Since the 1990s, the Colombian government had taken steps against corruption, including removing officers with links to cartels; this was noted by US officials.[125] The Clinton administration's 2000 proposal for assistance praised the work already done to reform the military, noting that it was undergoing a 'cultural transformation.'[126]

Major reforms to the defence sector began under Pastrana, and intensified under Uribe. After a round of peace talks with the FARC failed in early 2002, there was a growing sense among the country's elites that change was needed and that the military should be given the resources necessary to respond to the rebel threat. In 2002, following the collapse of peace talks, Uribe was unexpectedly swept into office on a promise to place security at the core of his government's programme, and reforms in the armed forces sped up. As part of that pledge, Uribe's public security policy document – the Democratic Security Policy – explicitly committed to tackling corruption in the security forces, stating that 'the Government and the security forces [will] work within the principles of efficiency, transparency and economy, to ensure that every peso spent contributes to security,' and that 'cases of corruption will be severely punished.'[127]

Eliminating need: defence budget increases and support for the armed forces

Defence reforms were accompanied by significant increases in the defence and security budget, following the recognition that the military had been underfunded throughout the 1990s. While defence spending hovered at around 3 percent of GDP,[128] not unusually low for the region, resources were limited for addressing an insurgency. Moreover, as the Colombian national police are

part of the Defence Ministry, this figure includes police as well as military spending.[129]

The armed forces had a significant administrative component, and even among the 146,000 troops, only around 30,000 were engaged in active military operations against the guerrillas.[130] The army lacked mobility, and the guerrillas had seized the initiative in the conflict. A string of humiliating defeats by the rebels between 1996 and 1998, leaving hundreds of soldiers dead or captured, underlined the need for reform.

By 2005, the Colombian defence budget had increased to 4.23% of GDP.[131] The country's defence spending also rose in absolute terms. One analysis suggests an increase from $4.6 billion in 2003 to $6.9 billion in 2006; other data supports an assessment of an increase by almost a third, in inflation-adjusted figures, between 2000-2006.[132] An important boost was provided through the 'war tax' that Uribe put in place, charging a one-off levy of 1.2% on companies and individuals with the equivalent of $60,000 or more in assets. The tax was a turning point in the conflict, a vital part of ensuring sufficient investment in the armed forces.[133]

The increase in the defence budget went largely toward Plan Colombia. In 1999-2005, the total spending on Plan Colombia reached US $10 billion, but only 45% of it came from the US: Colombian investment constituted 55% of Plan expenditure.[134] The US played a direct role in pressing for this increase in spending, making clear that its assistance was dependent on the Colombian government investing its own resources in security,[135] as well as carrying out budgetary and personnel reforms.[136] US assistance also helped make the boost possible, as it allowed investment in improving the capacities of the armed forces in the long term – particularly by providing air mobility to the army.[137]

Budgetary increases went hand-in-hand with greater professionalisation of the Colombian army and an improvement in conditions and benefits. In 2000, nearly 70% of the Colombian armed forces were made up of drafted soldiers, who served just 12 to 18 months. Nearly a fifth of these draftees were exempted from combat because they were high-school graduates – i.e. often members of the wealthier class.[138] By December 2001, 90% of combat-exempt graduates had been removed, and the number of professionals doubled from 21,000 to 53,000.[139] The number of professionals increased another 50% by 2005, up to 79,000, while the number of drafted soldiers was reduced by more than 40,000.[140] At the same time, the Pastrana administration increased soldier benefits, including salary, pensions, and healthcare, and greater opportunities to rise through the ranks. These reforms helped to make the armed forces a more attractive career choice, and to retain qualified soldiers and officers.[141]

Improvements in availability of resources, manpower and civilian support for the military not only enabled the armed forces to plan and conduct operations more effectively; they also directly contributed to diminishing corrupt practices, especially cooperation with drug traffickers and paramilitary groups. The improvements in equipment and mobility from 2000 onwards allowed the armed forces to reduce their dependence on paramilitaries and stop turning a blind eye to their abuses.[142] Improvements in security helped to break – or at least fragment – the control of major drug trafficking organisations, which combined financial inducements with threats to gain cooperation from soldiers.

> When soldiers and police feel stronger, with the support of Plan Colombia, the position is no longer plata o plomo [take money or take a bullet] – it is to comply with the law.[143]
>
> **Colombian military officer**

Improvements in the Colombian forces' intelligence capacities through Plan Colombia (including equipment to intercept communications) also contributed to increasing the cost of collaboration with drug traffickers and paramilitary groups. One US official noted that intelligence officers were now able to monitor opposing groups talking to their own officers, resulting in arrests and sanctions and sending a message to anyone considering accepting a bribe.[144] The fracturing of Colombia's criminal groups, with increased numbers of arrests and extraditions, also discouraged officials from working with them, as the likelihood grew of being outed by a detained trafficker in exchange for a lighter sentence.[145]

Countering personnel corruption

Purges

In 2000, President Pastrana issued a decree that gave the defence minister and armed forces leadership the power to dismiss military personnel without having to give a reason, or go through legal proceedings. A similar power to dismiss members of the police force had been granted in 1995. The 2000 decree became 'the main vehicle for dismissing poor performers and individuals suspected of human rights violations or paramilitary corruption,' according to a US cable.[146] In October of that year, the defence minister dismissed 388 members of the armed forces – 89 of them officers – stating that most had been linked to human rights violations.[147] The Defence Ministry denied that the measure had any connection to pressure from the US,[148] but, as one analyst commented, 'the immediate official approval from that country indicated the contrary.'[149]

In February 2002, a US Embassy cable analysing the Colombian government's actions to cut military ties with the paramilitaries reported that the decree powers had been used to remove over 600 police and military personnel from office.[150] There were a series of purges over the following years, with 350 people dismissed from the army between 2004 and 2006 – many reportedly for drug trafficking.[151]

However, the fact that no reason had to be given for the dismissals makes it difficult to gauge how many were related to corruption or other abuses, or what the effect was on the armed forces. The police's powers of discretionary dismissal have been described as a "doubtful remedy against corruption," that allows corruption to be swept under the carpet, due to the lack of investigations into those dismissed.[152] Some have suggested that police officials who resigned for other reasons may have been counted among those dismissed under these powers, in order to demonstrate progress against corruption. Human Rights Watch argued that the military purges actually reinforced lawlessness, due to the lack of prosecutions, and reported that some of those dismissed subsequently joined the paramilitaries,[153] a point also made by a US Embassy cable.[154] When US officials sought further information about those dismissed under discretionary authority, they were told by military officials that the reasons for dismissal were not recorded, and that few had been prosecuted because the standard of evidence needed for dismissal was lower than that for criminal investigations.[155]

Conditionality and vetting

One of the key mechanisms used to prevent US assistance to Colombia being tainted by corruption or human rights abuses was conditionality: tying the delivery of aid to the fulfilment of particular conditions. While most of these conditions were related to tackling human rights abuses, the verification and vetting mechanisms also had the effect of blocking many individuals suspected of corruption from receiving assistance.

Since 1996, worldwide restrictions on US assistance known as the 'Leahy Law' (after Senator Patrick Leahy) and inspired by the US experience in Colombia have banned assistance to foreign military or police units where there is evidence that they have committed grave human rights violations with impunity.[156] Under these requirements, units and individuals must undergo 'vetting', or a series of checks aimed to ensure that they can be cleared to receive assistance. Colombia is one of the countries where the Leahy Law has been most actively applied: the Bogotá Embassy vets more members and units of the security forces than any other country, covering 30,000-35,000 individuals and 1,400 units per year, with two full-time staff dedicated to vetting.[157]

In addition to the Leahy requirements, each appropriations bill since Plan Colombia was approved by Congress in 2000 has contained conditions that withhold part of security assistance until the State Department certifies that the Colombian government has met certain human rights requirements. These have varied over time, but often included requirements to remove members of the military who violate human rights; to tackle military ties to the paramilitaries; and to try in civilian courts members of the military accused of human rights violations.[158]

Though the US conditions have never resulted in aid being withheld altogether, Congress has used its power to delay portions of the aid for several months. For example, in 2006 the Senate Appropriations Committee froze $30 million in aid in response to the Jamundí case (see above), in which soldiers, allegedly in the service of a drug cartel, killed a group of counter-narcotics police officers.[159]

While the Leahy Law only refers to human rights violations, a State Department directive widened its requirements by mandating greater scrutiny across the board within Colombia – an initiative championed by the US Embassy early in the Plan Colombia period.[160] Several US interviewees confirmed that links between the drug trade and the armed conflict led to an extension of the vetting processes, which also gathered evidence of corruption and links to criminal groups.[161]

> '[A]ny Colombian soldier who was alleged to be involved in human rights violations or corruption would not pass the US vetting process. We would err on the side of caution.'[162]
>
> **Former US official**

In the vetting process, US officials check a number of different databases, including DEA records, which contained information beyond allegations of human rights abuses: 'We would look for narco ties,' said a former US official.[163] Through comprehensive vetting, the US government was able to identify individuals with links to corrupt networks in addition to trafficking, and exclude them from assistance programmes[164] Indeed, a Washington Post report from 1998 cites US officials as stating that the planned counter-narcotics brigade could only receive aid after it had been vetted for officers 'with a history of corruption' as well as human rights abuses.[165]

The Colombian army initially put up fierce resistance to the Leahy Law, questioning in particular how the US would judge the credibility of allegations.[166] The degree of US influence over Colombian military careers has also led to some resentment, with one academic complaining in 2003 that political control over the Colombian security forces was being exercised from Washington rather

than from Bogota, and that promotions and sanctions were dependent on the US State Department, Congress and NGOs rather than on performance.[167] Among the Colombian military, however, the Leahy requirements appear to have gradually been accepted. US officials noted that while at first they would see high numbers of individuals with questionable history put forward for training, over time there were fewer and fewer, as the Colombian military "internalised" the Leahy requirements.[168] According to Colombian officers, while concerns about due process – especially the absence of a trial and the lack of transparency – have persisted, the content of Leahy requirements has by and large been taken on board.[169] The Congressional Research Service cites interviews with US personnel who report that resistance to vetting has declined, and that vetting has become accepted and even welcomed on the Colombian side.[170]

However, there are questions around how far the restrictions in practice served to deny aid to abusive units. A 2010 study by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the US Office on Colombia found a degree of correlation between units committing extrajudicial killings, and those that received aid or training from the US.[171] In addition, Plan Colombia's promotion of joint operations meant that, in many cases, vetted units that received US assistance worked closely with those who did not. Training and intelligence can be passed on from those who receive it to others who have not been vetted. And, despite end-use monitoring programmes, it can be difficult to ensure that weapons and other equipment are not moved between units.[172]

There are also limits on the types of military assistance that are covered by Leahy restrictions. Foreign military sales are not included,[173] and, until 2014, Defense Department assistance other than training was not technically included – though, in practice, the vetting process was reportedly carried out at a similar level to that of State Department-sponsored programmes. Classified assistance programmes are difficult to monitor, as they are not made public,[174] and special operations forces at one point could provide training to Colombian troops without any legal obligation to go through human rights vetting processes.[175] This loophole appears to have been removed by 2017 reforms to Defense Department security assistance.

Shortfalls in information also hinder the application of the human rights conditions. According to one Colombian colonel, lack of information on vetted units made it more difficult for the Colombians to adhere to the restrictions: 'I have asked for a list of vetted units many times, but they are very secretive about it and it hasn't been possible. We have made our own database, as there are some units you know aren't certified.'[176] Civil society groups have raised concerns about the US government's procedures for gathering evidence about human rights abuses by the security forces,[177] and questioned the failure to publish lists of units to which assistance has been denied under the Leahy Law.[178]

Creation of new units

Faced with the difficulties in identifying clean units that could be trusted and that met the Leahy requirements, the US focused in the early years of Plan Colombia on creating new, self-contained, pre-vetted units, rather than pushing for wholesale reform of the armed forces.[179] Newly created military units were carefully vetted, and often polygraphed on a regular basis, to guard against infiltration and links with drug cartels. The US assisted Colombia in carrying out its own background checks and selection procedures, and assigned officers to watch newly minted units.

> 'They made the decision that no unit that existed could meet the standard, so they started from scratch. There were three new units created, and then they watched them like hawks.'[180]
>
> **US policymaker, quoted in Winifred Tate, 'U.S. Human Rights Activism and Plan Colombia'**

The most significant example of the creation of new units was the army's Counter-Narcotics Brigade. The first of its battalions was founded in 1999 to support the police in combating drug traffickers in southern Colombia, and was fully trained and equipped by the US.[181] Two more battalions were included in the Clinton Administration's Plan Colombia proposal, to make a full brigade, and the bulk of the first tranche of Plan funding – $600 out of $860 million – went to the brigade.[182] To avoid being contaminated by 'dirty' units, the counter-narcotics battalions were meant to operate independently of the rest of the army. This meant that they had to be more than twice the size of a normal battalion, because lots of functions normally provided from other army headquarters – such as intelligence capacity – had to be created independently.[183] The US-funded counter-narcotics police were also kept apart from the rest of the force, to lower the risk of corruption. Aside from basic salaries, all their funding and equipment came from the US: from fuel to planes, vehicles and training.[184] US officials argued that the Counter-Narcotics Brigade (which is still part of the Colombian armed forces) was a success, stressing its competence, commitment and good human rights record.[185]

NGOs that analysed the relationship between units that received US aid and those that committed extrajudicial killings found that, while those that received a moderate amount of US aid committed more such killings, those that received a high amount did not. The researchers

suggested a possible explanation for this finding – that units receiving high levels of assistance, including the Counter-Narcotics Brigade, may have been more closely scrutinised than other units.[186] However, other researchers found evidence that the counter-narcotics battalions 'actively coordinated' with brigades that worked directly with paramilitaries, calling into question the efficacy of attempts to keep the units separate.[187]

Assessing conditionality

Assessing the effect of conditionality applied as part of Plan Colombia is not a straightforward task. Most analysts, both US and Colombian, agree that the Leahy standards have contributed to raising standards and curtailing abuses in Colombia. However, the practical application of vetting and conditionality – from verification of existing units, to creation and separation of new ones – creates both additional financial costs and operational challenges that need to be taken into consideration by both donor and recipient nations: if vetting is applied, they will likely need to deal with similar side effects.

Many US officials argued that the Leahy Law helped raise standards, citing it as an important factor in the professionalisation of the Colombian security forces. Because of the scale of Plan Colombia assistance, any individual who could not be positively vetted would have their chances of promotion severely curtailed.[188] Colombian army officials agreed that being vetted conferred prestige on officers, and helped them move up in the ranks.[189]

> 'I believe many host nation officers have chosen to do the harder right rather than the easier wrong, because of the Leahy vetting process.'[190]
>
> **US government official**

However, for Colombian human rights lawyer Luís Guillermo Pérez, there is a limit to what the conditions can achieve. Leahy conditions, he said, helped save lives, but were not applied systematically or transparently.[191] US officials interviewed also pointed out that the difficulty of gaining vetted status after a unit had been barred meant that there might be little incentive for units, once barred, to raise their standards. One official made the observation that barred units might give up on trying to fulfil the requirements, as 'in certain circumstances you make people realise that no one is watching us because we will never get anything – they knew they had no hope.'[192]

Under the Leahy Law, if the authorities take 'effective steps to bring the responsible members of the security forces unit to justice,' assistance to the unit can be resumed. Some US officials said that this process was too slow in practice, with past abuses casting long shadows even over revamped units.

> 'If you bar a unit from getting assistance, and no one is in that unit at the time you bar it who was there at the time when the allegations took place, it seemed pretty unfair to me. The bad actors are gone, so why am I still beating up on that poor unit?'[193]
>
> **General James T. Hill, former Commander, Southern Command**

In response to similar concerns, the Defense and State Departments published a joint policy in 2015 that set out guidelines on restoring assistance to barred units. According to an analysis by Rand Corporation, this has helped several embassies around the world to successfully rehabilitate units.[194]

There have been suggestions that a law explicitly blocking aid to those credibly accused of corruption might be helpful in tackling this issue; indeed, US law already prohibits assistance to individuals or entities convicted of violating the laws around drug trafficking.[195] Such a measure would make it easier to block corrupt personnel from receiving assistance, making this a matter of law rather than a policy decision. However, a law that explicitly applied Leahy vetting to corruption allegations would not only raise national sovereignty issues;[196] it could also have the unintended result of halting assistance to forces that most need it. Some US officials have argued that a more productive approach would be to train precisely those units accused of violations.[197] As one official put it, 'The irony is that we teach human rights courses in these countries, and yet we can't teach those people who have problems with human rights. The same would apply to corruption.'[198]

> '[A] strict definition [of corruption] could mean that you couldn't give funding to the type of countries that really need it, but only to places like Europe or Japan that are too prosperous to be eligible for assistance in the first place. It could tie your hands as opposed to being helpful.'[199]
>
> **US official**

The creation of new units has had a degree of success in distancing the US from corruption and abuses, but it is more difficult to determine to what extent it actually tackled

these problems and their root causes. Researcher Winifred Tate has criticised the attempt to 'create a parallel … mini-military within the Colombian military structure rather than insist on systemic reform.' For Tate, the creation of new units failed to bring about institutional reform, while the distinction between the 'clean' and existing units proved very difficult to preserve.[200]

Processes such as vetting and creation of new units also incur financial costs. As Ambassador Brownfield noted, human rights vetting 'is a full time job,'[201] and the US Embassy put in place additional staff capable of carrying out checks on Colombian units. The insistence on keeping newly minted and vetted units separate from other also incurred costs as they needed supporting capabilities that would normally be provided centrally and more cheaply due to economy of scale. These considerations need to be included in security assistance budgets in order to ensure their smooth implementation. Colombian army officials spoke about the difficulty of working with units that weren't vetted by the US: 'I had helicopters in San José de Guaviare, we wanted to get the troops out of the jungle, but I couldn't let the men get on them as they weren't vetted – imagine.' Even to board a Plan Colombia helicopter they would need special clearance from the Embassy: 'We sometimes needed to use the Omega Task Force units, but they didn't have vetting, so we would have to ask the Embassy for special permission to move units.'[202]

Dedicated anti-corruption task forces

The improving security situation and greater availability of resources also helped make the argument for greater transparency in the Colombian armed forces. This shift can be seen in initiatives such as DANTE, a programme of the Colombian army, launched in 2016, that is intended to promote transparency and fight corruption within the institution.[203] During the most intense phase of the conflict, a programme like DANTE would not have been accepted by a force focused on avoiding casualties, but in a more secure environment, and a better-managed institution, it does have a chance of changing practices and behaviours.[204] As well as liaising with oversight bodies and civil society, DANTE coordinates institutional corruption risk analyses, manages efforts to educate soldiers about the risks of corrupt activities and to encourage them to report anything suspicious, and recognises soldiers who display exceptional integrity. It also reviews certain procurement processes, specifically those with a higher degree of risk.

The programme is still in its early days, and faces challenges in implementing its goals, but having an interlocutor within the institution has been positive for civil society groups that are pressing for transparency, and for the government bodies charged with overseeing the military. There are plans to roll the initiative out to the other branches of the armed forces.

Investing in monitoring and oversight

Challenges related to management and oversight of equipment received through Plan Colombia provided the impulse for improvements in Colombia's ability to track and monitor materiel. In the early years of US assistance, Colombian interviewees noted, management of US contributions was a 'black box, a mystery,' with little clarity over what was going to arrive when and how it was going to be maintained.[205] In 2003, the Comptroller Delegate for defence, justice and security reported to the Defence Ministry that there was a lack of follow-up or clear evaluations of the resources received as part of Plan Colombia, with each military command registering equipment it received separately and no centralised database monitoring the equipment received.[206]

Over the years, changes in management and budgeting for equipment received from the US included centralising the inventory and processing items through the central government rather than sending them directly to the units concerned.[207] The procedures for receiving and registering equipment have been revised and codified in recent years, and a directive issued in 2005 obliges all forces and offices in the Defence Ministry to report goods and services they have received via international cooperation.[208] Budget transparency has also increased. While assets – such as planes – that remain the property of the US are not incorporated into the budget, the costs of maintaining them, paid by Colombia, are in the national budget.[209]

The government's transparency secretary has asserted that the military now publishes information proactively to a greater degree.[210] However, despite advances in recent years, Colombia's freedom of information laws retain broad exemptions for sensitive defence and security information.[211]

Oversight of classified expenses

Misuse of 'confidential expenses' was enabled by lack of control over them, with only limited oversight from the Comptroller General's Office (Contraloría General de la República).[212] A 2006 law increased the degree of oversight, and empowered the Office to audit classified spending.[213] The Office has a dedicated team that in theory carries out at least three audits a year, responds to any complaints on the topic, and produces reports. The audits are not published, but are shared with a congressional intelligence committee: the Commission to Monitor the Activities of Intelligence and Counter-intelligence (Comisión legal de seguimiento a las actividades de inteligencia y contrainteligencia).[214] The

commission was established by a 2013 law, which sets out the body's obligation to issue an opinion on the Comptroller's audit of confidential expenses, and to seek an annual report on this spending from the Joint Intelligence Council (Junta de Inteligencia Conjunta), which is made up of officials from the key institutions involved in intelligence matters.[215]

There are, however, questions about the effectiveness of the new Congress commission. NGOs have reported that the commission is facing bureaucratic and technical obstacles, and a lack of political will that impedes oversight.[216] Colombian media have also noted that very little is known about the commission's internal management, and that it has not been actively responding to intelligence-related scandals when they break out – all of which suggests limited capacity.[217]

Donor monitoring and oversight

All transfers of equipment under Plan Colombia involve an agreement setting out the requirements for how it will be used, as well as arrangements for End-User Monitoring (EUM). This covers US processes to track where the equipment is and how it is being used. Dedicated teams of US personnel check Plan Colombia equipment, carrying out serial number inventories, and ensuring that all equipment remains with the units it was assigned to. US-provided equipment can only be transferred, sold, or destroyed under the agreed terms, and disposal of sensitive materiel needs to be authorised and observed by a US representative. These ongoing EUM processes are complemented by spot checks carried out by audit teams.

> 'We have eyes on just about everything we donate every three years, and we are tracking it at all times, through status reports.'[218]
>
> **US Official**

Several US interviewees highlighted the sustained, long-term presence of US personnel in Colombian bases as a safeguard against corruption risks. Officers and non-commissioned officers are present in the Colombian Defence Ministry and embedded in certain brigades in the field, where they assist with planning and intelligence. The number of US personnel and contractors who can be in the country in support of Plan Colombia is currently capped at 800 military officers and 600 civilians.[219] During earlier phases of Plan Colombia, the Embassy's Military Group had presence in practically every region, helping the armed forces with procurement, maintenance and training.[220] The presence of these advisers, US officials claim, helps to raise standards: US personnel are obliged to report on any wrongdoing they see, which can lead to those implicated being relieved of their duties.[221] In a diplomatic cable setting out the lessons learned from Plan Colombia, Ambassador William Brownfield noted that embedding personnel in host country institutions 'provides subtle early leverage over US assistance programs.'[222]

Modern resource management systems

As US assistance to Colombia was mostly provided through training and equipment donations, there were few risks related to managing cash. Almost all military assistance went through the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), which worked with Colombian officials to determine needs; items were purchased by the US government and then delivered to Colombia.[223] The US system provided an impulse for reform in Colombian institutions as they attempted to manage the influx of equipment and improve their own processes.[224]

> 'Plan Colombia really changed the country – not so much the money, but the processes. Dealing with partners with higher standards meant we had to raise ours.'[225]
>
> **Colombian security expert**

One key set of measures was the defence procurement reform of Uribe's first term. While the changes were presented as measures to increase efficiency rather than to mitigate corruption, they did, in effect, close off many avenues for corruption in procurement.[226] Spearheaded by Uribe's first defence minister, Marta Lucia Ramírez – selected partly for her distance from the military agenda and therefore her ability to resist military opposition to changes[227] – the reforms centralised major procurement processes within the Defence Ministry, removing the discretion of each branch of the armed forces to individually handle procurement. This brought procurement further under civilian control, made it more transparent and efficient, and allowed the forces to take advantage of economies of scale.

> 'Now, the budget is constructed not just by the military but by experts from the National Planning Department. An army commander can't just say 'I need x' – experts look at the objectives and decide how to assign the resources.'[228]
>
> **Officials, Colombian Defence Ministry**

At the same time, a decree intended to increase

transparency in public procurement across the board shifted the presumption away from secrecy in defence procurement processes. A 1993 law had mandated that all public procurement should be carried out through public tender, but made a broad exception for 'goods and services needed for defence and national security.' In 2002, an executive decree narrowed down the exception, flipping the approach from a preference for secrecy to a preference for transparency, unless otherwise specified.[229]

While the centralisation of procurement was not an explicit condition of US aid, some Colombian interviewees have described it as a 'side effect' of Plan Colombia.[230] The procurement reforms 'had everything to do with Plan Colombia,' according to one Ministry official. 'Most of the equipment was acquired between 2002 and 2006 – it was such a big expansion that we had to change the process to minimise the risk of corruption.'[231] The army's Aviation Brigade, for example, saw its personnel double and the number of aircraft it managed increase threefold between 2000 and 2008, a change that necessitated wide-ranging adjustments.[232]

More broadly, the US offered assistance in restructuring the defence sector, reorganising, creating joint commands, improving intelligence, and modernising administrative processes and IT systems. As Semana magazine noted, 'before 2004, military logistics were in the Stone Age', with brigade commanders accustomed to going without radios, helicopter fuel, and medicines on short notice, and corruption manifesting through unfair procurement processes and illegal arms sales.[233] A US government watchdog noted in 2008 that each branch of the Colombian military and police operated US-built helicopters, but that there was no easy way to identify what spare parts each service had available.[234] As a result, waiting for a replacement part for a damaged helicopter could take months.

This led the US government to make the redesign of the administrative side of the war a priority for Plan Colombia, bringing about a 'silent revolution.'[235] In 2004, the armed forces introduced the Integrated Logistics System (SILOG), designed to centralise the registration and tracking of resources and allow officials to determine inventory levels in real time. SILOG was part of the separation of planning from acquisitions and operations: former US and Colombian officials noted that these reforms had been important in reducing the risk of corruption in the form of stealing and reselling equipment.[236]

While some interviewees stressed that these changes would have taken place irrespective of Plan Colombia, they noted that the Plan provided both inspiration and political cover for the government to overhaul the armed forces.[237] US support gave President Pastrana the justification to begin imposing reforms that were necessary to change the balance of the conflict. Meanwhile, the Colombian military accepted pressure from the US because of the long history of cooperation between the two.[238] Plan Colombia, while it may not have initiated the reforms in the Colombian military, was an important factor:

> 'It gave us clear standards, air transportation, training, vetting; a new world of technology and intelligence.'[239]
>
> **Colombian army officer**

The US also supported long-term planning, budgeting and staffing reforms in the Colombian Defence Ministry. In 2003, Defence Minister Ramírez asked the Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR) at the US Naval Postgraduate School to support her efforts to restructure the Ministry and improve civilian control, reportedly telling CCMR personnel that while there was now a civilian defence minister in Colombia, a true civilian ministry was still absent. CCMR's analysis pinpointed issues ranging from the lower salaries paid to civilian compared to military personnel in the Ministry, to a lack of a clear mission and processes, and a lack of focus on intelligence. The reforms it recommended focused on changes to strategic and operational planning; the rationalisation of processes to generate requirements; civilian leadership for the acquisition process; and raising civilian salaries to match increasing responsibilities.[240] By 2011, according to Thomas Bruneau, former CCMR Director, there had been significant progress in these reforms, and the Ministry could be considered as a 'robust and functional' example of a defence institution.[241]

In 2009, the Defence Ministry sought US assistance in improving its planning and budgeting processes. Under the DOD's Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI), the US supported Colombia in implementing a system that gathered information on defence resources in a single database, allowing the Ministry to project future costs across all branches of the armed forces and link them to the national security strategy. According to former Defence Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón, the increased transparency of the centralised system was one example of a 'cultural change' that the relationship with the US brought to the Colombian defence sector.[242]

But procurement and organisational reform was not without challenges: despite centralisation, the country's procedures remained complex and sometimes unwieldy, encouraging Colombian officials to look for alternatives.[243] One alternative was to go through US procurement tied to Plan Colombia: as a former US official noted, Colombian officials had told him that it was quicker to ask the US when they needed things, rather than go through their own cumbersome system.[244] As recently as in 2016, the OECD called the country's overall public procurement system 'highly complex', prone to inconsistencies and overly complicated procedures.[245]

Host nation training and mentoring

Training for the security forces was an important component of Plan Colombia, and the country became one of the biggest recipients of US training in the world, with more than 100,000 trainees between 2000 and 2017.[246]

There was no explicit anti-corruption element in the training, although human rights courses were delivered on a large scale. There have, however, been US-backed anti-corruption and integrity programmes for the Colombian police, including the 'Culture of Lawfulness' programme, launched in 2005.[247] Some US interviewees suggested that this lack of focus on defence sector corruption owed to a US perception that the risks were low, while others attributed it to concern around the military's serious human rights issues.[248]

But the overall design of US training – from operational courses on maintaining equipment and fumigation of coca crops to management and procedural courses aimed at those working within government institutions – does appear to have increased the Colombian institutions' capacity to counter corruption. Importantly, the training was not only combat-oriented, but addressed the capabilities necessary to achieve and maintain greater effectiveness.

> '[I]t helped with planes and fumigation – operational matters – but there were also lines of institutional strengthening, programmes of training and capacity building for both military and civilian personnel, [and] a new focus on capacity-based planning.'[249]
>
> **Former Colombian defence official**

For example, the US delivered courses in resource management, including aspects on best practices in procurement and strategic planning around personnel and infrastructure, at US institutions such as the William J. Perry Center at the National Defense University. Colombians made up one of the biggest groups of students at the institution: out of the 3,928 total graduates from the western hemisphere who have taken in-residence courses as of 2018, 527 have been Colombians, most of them civilian defence officials.[250] A former Defense Department official, who taught at National Defense University from 2004-2009, described these courses as 'low cost, but high impact,' arguing that 'they could really have an impact on the way military institutions do their accounts and mitigate corruption.'[251] Training the Colombian armed forces in the technical skills to maintain equipment donated under Plan Colombia also helped decrease corruption risk, according to the Colombian Defence Ministry, as it meant that more maintenance could be done in-house, rather than contracted to the private sector.[252]

As well as directly educating individuals, US training programmes had a broader impact as a mechanism for promoting the careers of the officers who were considered 'clean.' Preferred officers would be invited to the best training courses (often for up to a year), and training in the US became an important part of career progression in the Colombian armed forces.[253] Because the US was obliged by Congress to carry out vetting on all those it trained, it meant that US training acted as a 'quality control' for officers eligible for promotion.[254] The courses, seen as a prize and an inducement, also created motivation for behavioural change in Colombia: the prestige of studying abroad, better career prospects and generous per diem allowances all created demand to attend courses and therefore promoted behaviour that would qualify officers to participate.[255] US investigations of the Colombian military's human rights abuses – which could lead to disqualification from training courses – created impetus for improving standards.[256]

As officers considered clean by the US rose through the ranks and the tone from the top changed, this raised standards in the institution overall, according to US interviewees.

> 'There was lots of emphasis on developing strong clean leadership – and those people were very interested in and careful about who worked for them.'[257]
>
> **Former US official**

On the other hand, there are questions about the effectiveness of human rights and other training courses in improving standards of behaviour. One analysis of the careers of Colombians who taught at or graduated from a course at Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) between 2001 and 2003 found that 12 of the 25 on whom information was available had either been charged with a serious crime, or commanded units whose members were accused of committing multiple extrajudicial killings.[258] There is also criticism of the lack of transparency around those receiving US training and the criteria for their recruitment; the introduction of 'letters of commitment', setting out the criteria for both sides, were an attempt to address that.[259] Finally, there are concerns about the lack of effective procedures to monitor the impact of US training. One official said that the US is currently working to put in place a tracking system to ensure that recipients are making best use of their training, by staying in the jobs they have been trained for rather than being moved to posts in different fields: 'In future we'll have a better idea of how training actually impacted the security forces.'[260]

Sanctions and their limits

Plan Colombia was accompanied by a series of reforms that aimed to make the armed forces more accountable. These included a new code of military justice, intended to reduce impunity for human rights abuses and other crimes.[261] Colombian law states that alleged crimes committed by military personnel 'in relation to service' should be tried within the military justice system, which is widely seen as ineffective, and as allowing impunity for officers who have committed human right abuses. In 1997, a high court ruled that serious abuses should be handled in the civilian system, with military jurisdiction to be considered only in exceptional circumstances.[262]

Most corrupt acts committed by members of the armed services fall within the civilian law enforcement system, and are, in theory, investigated by the Attorney General's Office. In 2014, Semana magazine reported that this body was investigating over 5,700 members of the military and police, in relation to crimes ranging from human rights abuses to links with organised crime. Following the 2014 scandal around alleged corruption in army procurement, President Juan Manuel Santos stated that he had asked the Attorney General to make the investigation a priority, 'because acts of corruption like these should not for any reason fall within military justice.'[263]

But the rapid growth in the security forces under Plan Colombia placed a great strain on the institutions – including command structures and oversight mechanisms.[264] As Defence Minister, Santos linked a series of scandals around infiltration of the armed forces to the speed of their expansion.[265] This would also affect the military's ability to build up oversight and investigative institutions capable of monitoring growing personnel numbers.

The investigation and sanctioning process for armed forces officers has had its shortcomings. Some analysts point out that, while many low-ranking officers have been convicted and imprisoned for low-level corruption, high ranking officers linked to corruption have generally faced only the sanction of being removed from office. Between 2002 and 2014, of 749 military personnel convicted of all crimes within the civilian justice system, only 73 were officer class – and only 14 of those above the grade of captain.[266]

The system has also failed to explore and document the military's role in the AUC's drug trafficking activities and the corrupt practices that fuelled that. Corruption, according to Colombia analyst Adam Isacson, can be more dangerous to denounce that human rights abuses: it tends to 'affect many more careers, including those of senior officers.'[267]

Comprehensive approach: visa denials

As well as vetting personnel and promoting their careers of preferred officers through training programmes, one of the mechanisms the US used to limit the influence (and career opportunities) of military personnel implicated in corruption or abuses was to deny or revoke their US visas. Famously, the US removed President Samper's visa while he was in office, in protest against his suspected links with the Cali Cartel. This sanction was applied to a wide range of Colombian officials, including many in the security forces.

A number of US interviewees confirmed that denying US visas to Colombian officials was an important policy tool, to be used when all other measures have failed.

> 'We try to approach people quietly and discuss, and if there's a lot of resistance, if it becomes a sticking point, the ultimate insult is to publicly cancel their visa. It's an established policy.'[268]
>
> **Former US official**

The effect of revocation of a US visa on an officer's career was immediate: '[i]f you don't have a US visa, you're nobody.'[269] Widely resented in Colombia, the visa denial policy could be a highly efficient policy stick, used to pressure the Colombian institutions to dismiss suspect officials and military officers.[270]

The significance of holding a US visa for high-ranking security officials is made clear in Colombian media coverage, even prior to Plan Colombia. In the 1980s and 1990s Semana magazine reported on cases of high-ranking military and police officers denied US visas, noting that it was impossible for an individual denied entry to the US to lead the security institutions.[271] A former vice-minister of defence stressed the political impact of a visa denial:

> 'The importance is in the political message that it sends – it's not that the general can't go to Disneyland, but that he can't attend training courses or conduct operations. It's a legal and moral sanction, and a very strong message that you aren't welcome in the US.'[272]
>
> **Alejandro Arbeláez, former Vice-Minister of Defence, Colombia**

Arbeláez rejected the idea that the removal of visas was used by the US to place pressure on the Colombian government. When a visa is removed, 'it means that two allies are showing their lack of confidence together. We didn't have to be told by the US to sanction a general – we wanted to do it, because it was the right thing.' Visa removals, he said, were outcomes of a jointly conducted process: 'For false positives, when we found out that there was evidence, we retired some high-level officials, and worked with the judiciary to investigate them. In parallel, the US removed their visas.'[273]

But the interactions between the US and Colombian governments over the removal of visas have played out in various different ways. Two high-level visa denials prior to Plan Colombia – to armed forces commander General Hernando Zúñiga and to General Ivan Ramírez – reportedly caused tensions between the two governments, with the Colombian Defence Ministry reportedly agreeing to dismiss the officers only after the State Department threatened to go public over the visa revocations.[274] Zúñiga was forced out, but was appointed soon after as ambassador to Russia. Ramírez, despite significant pressure, was not removed from the army, and was sent to Chile as military attaché.[275]

In 2002, the State Department publicly stated that it had removed the visa of Admiral Rodrigo Quiñones Cárdenas over suspicions that he had connections to drug traffickers. When the defence minister announced Quiñones' departure, she confirmed that it was related to the visa revocation.[276] In December 2017, it was reported that the US had been reviewing the visa of the armed forces commander, General Juan Pablo Rodríguez Barragán, shortly before he was removed from his position the previous month,[277] and that he had been linked to false positive killings by recent court cases. However, the Colombian authorities have denied any connection between Rodríguez's removal and visa issues.[278] His replacement, General Alberto Mejía, was popular with the US and the international community, with a reputation for taking a strong public stance against corruption – though he was replaced by the new president, Iván Duque, in December 2018, as part of a refreshing of the military high command.

US efforts to sanction corrupt military officials could fall short. In 2007, Admiral Arango Bacci received a letter from the US Embassy, informing him that his and his wife's visas had been cancelled.[279] He was forced to retire from the navy that same month, accused of leaking information to traffickers (see above). However, prosecutors later changed course and argued that Bacci had been framed by elements in the navy's leadership in order to end his career. They called for an investigation into the navy's commander – who had referred the case to civilian prosecutors – and others.[280] Ambassador Brownfield was criticised for speaking in support of the commander's decision to pass the case to the civilian authorities.[281]

The visa removal policy has been criticised for hurting troop morale and stalling careers due to loss of training opportunities and harm to individuals' reputation. For some, it was also more effective in distancing the US from individuals accused of abuses than in preventing further problems.[282]

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Plan Colombia was a substantial, long-lasting programme of security assistance that supported the creation of modern armed forces in Colombia. What enabled it to work was in large part a convergence of interests between donor and host nations, with Colombia prepared to make changes in order to better utilise US assistance, and the US prepared to underpin additional costs inherent in measures such as vetting and creation of new units. This enabled both countries, over the longer term, to address deep-seated drivers and manifestations of corruption.

One key conclusion from Plan Colombia is that with investment of time, resources, and attention, corrupt practices can be curtailed and their impact mitigated. It does not, however, come cost-free: US measures aimed at tackling corruption and human rights abuses, such as vetting and creation of new units from scratch, were costly and required additional manpower. What this means for security assistance designers is that in contexts where corruption is judged to be a serious issue, budgeting and planning for anti-corruption measures needs to happen at the very outset of programme design, to allow sufficient resources and expertise to be mobilised.

Policies such as conditionality and vetting were also difficult to implement comprehensively and were not entirely successful in restricting aid to 'clean', vetted units. Personnel movement between units, and difficulties in implementing vetting, often meant that both equipment and training were passed on to non-vetted units. Importantly, however, these approaches did change the norms and practices shaping the priorities and behaviour of the Colombian military: despite initial resistance to both the principles and their implementation, they did prompt a significant cultural change.

The second important takeaway is that while conditionality can and does work, withholding resources from defence and security forces affected by corruption is not always the right move. In Colombia, one of the key drivers of corrupt ties between the armed forces, paramilitary groups, and drug traffickers was the pre-existing domestic shortage of resources and political support for the military, which left the armed forces exposed to pressure from illegal groups. More support, training and equipment was in this case a better response than cutting off support entirely.

The final takeaway is that the impact of corruption, even if overshadowed by other issues such as human rights abuses, should not be overlooked. As the conditionality measures attached to Plan Colombia were primarily focused on human rights abuses, corruption issues

have often slipped through the cracks. As a result, links between corruption and human rights abuses – for example in the case of 'false positives' – were not explored or severed.

The Colombian experience may have already influenced the development of conditions for US assistance to Central America, which has greatly expanded since 2015. In addition to human rights requirements, Congressional conditions on funding to Central America in financial year 2016 stipulated that 50 percent of assistance for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras requires certification that the governments were 'taking effective steps' to tackle corruption, including investigations and prosecutions of government officials where credible allegations exist.[283] Similarly, one former US military officer confirmed that the directive to extend Leahy vetting to corruption and other criminal activity was also given in Honduras – based, in part, on its use in Colombia.[284]

In Colombia, however, the fight against defence sector corruption is far from over. In July 2019, several army generals were dismissed following accusations of corruption, including allegedly stealing fuel, extorting money from junior officers, and taking bribes in exchange for awarding gun licences.[285] There have been concerns over the risk of a new wave of extrajudicial killings, after Colombian army officers reported being asked to sign a pledge to increase the rate of attacks, reviving memories of the "false positive" killings. One officer told the New York Times that a general had ordered unit commanders to "do anything" to get results, even if it meant forming alliances with criminal groups.[286]Meanwhile, allegations of corruption and the illicit diversion of resources have marred the peace process. In April 2018, the head of Colombia in Peace (Colombia en Paz) – a fund sponsoring post-conflict projects – was fired following complaints from international and Colombian bodies about irregularities and possible corruption in the fund's operations. The Attorney General's Office alleged that an illicit network of intermediaries had infiltrated fund structures, aiming to extract kickbacks worth up to 20% of the value of healthcare and agricultural contracts.[287]

The UN has criticised Colombia's failures in implementing the peace accords, impeded by corruption, an increase in violence and killings, and reports of the armed forces' continued involvement in drug trafficking, fuel smuggling, and illegal gold mining. The peace process, one civil society analyst suggested, will be a test for the armed forces: "we will see whether Plan Colombia has created an armed forces that has the integrity to take a step back in times of peace."[288] More broadly, a perception of widespread public sector corruption was a key issue in the 2018 presidential election, and later that year proposed anti-corruption legislation was supported by the vast majority of those who voted in a referendum – though it failed to gain the required number of votes to be binding.[289] As Colombia's military looks outward, with greater contributions to UN peacekeeping missions and to regional security – including by training other countries' armed forces – the experience of transforming the military and countering defence corruption in an operational environment is likely to prove useful to others. For these integrity gains to be preserved, however, the Colombian government cannot afford to lose its focus on tackling corruption and human rights abuses.

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