

A human rights tragedy: Strategic localization of US foreign policy in Colombia

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Abstract

How and to what extent do ideas and political discourses shape bilateral cooperation between a powerful state and its weaker ally? Why do weaker states act in ways that diverge from the expectations and preferences of the powerful state despite the contractual agreement borne out of bilateral cooperation? Drawing perspectives from constructivism and principal-agent framework, this article provides a conceptual-interpretative analysis of post-9/11 counterterrorism cooperation of the US government with Colombia – America’s long-standing ally in the region. The case study shows that the provision of security is not only conceived in the domestic levels but also produced in the transnational sphere; that security provision is not only a materially oriented political activity but also an ideational-discursive exchange where political actors legitimize and facilitate interstate cooperation; and, finally, that the power of dominant states is not only produced from within them but strategically reconstituted by weaker powerful states.

Keywords

Colombia, counterterrorism, human rights, Latin America, political violence, state repression, US foreign policy, war on drugs, war on terror

Introduction

How and to what extent do ideas and political discourses shape bilateral interstate cooperation between a powerful state and weaker ally? Why do weaker states act in ways that diverge from the expectations and preferences of the powerful state despite their contractual agreement? Such questions comprise an important concern in the scholarly literature

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in International Relations (IR), most especially on the origins and dynamics of interstate cooperation and the hegemon's provision of transnational public goods.

First, the dominant IR literature on hegemony and interstate cooperation heavily emphasizes material and systemic factors that affect the maintenance of the post-1945 world order. With two contending insights, the hegemonic stability theory has long been considered as the most influential perspective in understanding the dynamics of the post-1945 liberal world order.¹ The first perspective pertains to neorealism, which highlights the hegemon's material power in coercing and compelling secondary states to abide by the rules that promote the hegemon-led international order. The second perspective, on the other hand, refers to the neoliberal paradigm based on the work of Robert Keohane,² who highlights 'cooperation and regime(s) formation without hegemony', whereby a world order without a hegemon can persist 'through intensive interaction among a few players [which] helps to substitute for, or supplement, the actions of a hegemon'. Both perspectives, unfortunately, downplay the role of ideational factors in sustaining the current world order. Although critical perspectives such as the neo-Gramscian literature focus on the role of historically bounded ideas and non-state structures in perpetrating hegemony,³ further empirical research is needed in regard to state elites' instrumentalization of policy discourses⁴ in an attempt to justify the perceived relative gains of bilateral interstate cooperation.

Second, the literature on the hegemon's provision of public goods has primarily focused on issues pertaining to the political economy of global trade,⁵ but it has yet to provide an empirical account of how interstate cooperation (or dominant state vis-à-vis secondary states) occurs during a period of an international military security crisis, as it was in the immediate post-9/11 years. Third, the dominant economics and social science scholarship on transnational cooperation has often focused on the strategic-motivational interests of cooperating agents.⁶ Fourth, by looking at the role of powerful states such as the United States, the emphasis in mainstream International Relations literature has always been on its provision of material goods (e.g. military security), but this article focuses on how powerful states fundamentally shape the discourses in its partner country to the extent that they can facilitate (primarily through legitimization) significant domestic political changes such as increased state repression.

In redress of that neglect, this article provides a conceptual-interpretative analysis of the US government's post-9/11 counterterror cooperation with Colombia, America's long-standing ally in the Latin American region. As I discuss in the next section, my main argument states that post-9/11 US counterterror cooperation with other allies, as it is often framed in rationalist-materialist terms, was an outcome generated by the strategic reframing of terror-oriented discourses that sought to legitimize increased state repression and US influence in the domestic politics of its partner countries. My analysis integrates insights from principal-agent (PA) theory, constructivism in IR (securitization theory) and political violence in order to understand the emergence of terror-oriented cooperation between the United States and its allies and its consequences. That being said, the analysis here highlights instead how the process of strategic reframing and interpretation – or what I call as *strategic localization* – of the hegemon's discourses fundamentally shaped the ways and substantive targets of US counterterror assistance in partner countries' domestic politics.

The case of Colombia is theoretically useful and important for two notable reasons, among many others. First, inspired by the theoretical aims of this article, the case of Colombia demonstrates how security cooperation between two long-standing liberal democratic allies could lead to disastrous consequences to human rights, especially in the context of a transnational security crisis. In comparative methodological terms, the Colombia case is a ‘crucial case’⁷ because it confirms some of the theoretical insights I would like to show in regard to the political motivations and human rights consequences of bilateral cooperation amid a transnational security crisis. Second, the case of US–Colombia cooperation became the exemplary model for many other types of security collaborations within the region – although I contend in the conclusion that the terror-oriented approach should not be blindly adopted in other countries. Hence, as Arlene Tickner⁸ confirms, studying the Colombia case is likely to give us a more informed view of other similar processes within and beyond South America, at least for analytical purposes:

Colombia is stepping up efforts to export its ‘know-how’ to countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and to nations beyond the Western Hemisphere affected by drug-related crime and violence, largely via South-South cooperation and triangulated efforts with U.S. support ... what seems to be an emerging international security cooperation model in which both Colombia and the United States play key roles.

Hence, the goal is not to focus on the *causal* underpinnings of US counterterror cooperation and increased state repression in partner countries. Instead, the article uses illustrative empirical examples to primarily uncover the *discursive* aspects of strategic-materialist interests and ideational aspects of the ‘global war on terror’ as it was implemented beyond the American homeland. By focusing on the converging US and Colombian discourses, I show that (1) security provision is not only conceived at the domestic/local level but also produced and sustained at the transnational sphere; (2) that security provision is not only a materially oriented political activity but also an ideational-discursive exchange where political actors legitimize various coercive actions of the state and interstate cooperation; and, finally, (3) that the hegemonic power of dominant states such as the United States is not only produced from within them but is sustained and strategically reconstituted by weaker powerful states in ways that can even diverge from the publicly stated and intended goals of the hegemonic state.⁹

My analytical motivation emerges from the need for contemporary IR scholarship on cooperation to reconsider if and how ideas – including discourses, norms, shared expectations, and other non-material macro-factors in global politics – fundamentally shape the scope, extent and grounds for justification of any form of interstate cooperation. Consequently, this piece highlights a missing perspective in such a discussion by zooming into the role of ideas and discourses that legitimize and facilitate the hegemon’s provision of security as a public good through secondary states.

In substantiating those arguments, this article is organized as follows. The next section discusses perspectives from PA framework and constructivism, particularly in order to understand *why* post-9/11 counterterror cooperation of the United States with Colombia transpired the way it did. Next, the article illustrates those arguments in the case of Colombia’s domestic political elites, who actively reframed US counterterror discourses

in an attempt to legitimize increased domestic state repression. In very broad strokes, the empirical section underscores the strategic motivations and the discursive strategies of the Bush and Uribe administrations in the context of the US-led war on terror and the distinctive ways counterterror policies were implemented in Colombia. The article concludes by discussing how theoretical perspectives from PA framework, constructivism, and political violence shed new light in understanding the emergence and consequences of cooperation between states during a security crisis.

Theorizing cooperation: PA approach and strategic localization

To lay the theoretical groundwork for understanding the empirical case of post-9/11 US–Colombia counterterror cooperation, this section is divided into two key parts. First, I discuss *PA framework* that highlights the materialist and transaction-oriented underpinnings of bilateral cooperation and my concept of *strategic localization*¹⁰ that shows how weaker states (as agents) exert their power by reinterpreting the dominant state’s (as principal) political discourses and preferences.

First, PA framework has been a prominent approach to understanding important empirical problems in the social sciences, including economics, public administration and organizational theory. In IR, this framework gained traction especially in the study of international organizations and global governance.¹¹ Yet, the PA framework can enrich our understanding of how powerful and weaker states engage in bilateral counterterror cooperation, which includes political support through public diplomacy and foreign aid. The PA framework uncovers the origins and consequences of a situation when entity X (the principal) mandates entity Y (the agent) to implement a course of action on one’s behalf for a specified price.¹² In this bilateral relationship, the PA framework maintains that there is a dual asymmetry between the agent and the principal because of their diverging *preferences* and dissimilar levels of *information*. Demonstrative of the asymmetry in preferences, agents do not always act in ways that perfectly or fully align with the principal’s preferences.¹³ Indicative of the asymmetry in information, the principal may be able to observe the outcome of agent’s execution of the tasks, *but not necessarily a full* picture of the processes and the implementation patterns undertaken by the agent.¹⁴ In other words, bilateral cooperation between powerful and weak states is bound to encounter two key problems: information asymmetry and preferences asymmetry.

In applying the PA framework in the post-9/11 US–Colombia case, let me underline some preliminary analytic specifications. First, acting as the principal, the US government under the Bush administration launched the global war on terror and sought Colombia’s assistance in curbing armed communist insurgency and illegal drug cartels – both of which were deemed detrimental to US interests in the Andean region. Second, as I discuss in the next section, the Colombian government, acting as an agent, enjoyed a relatively wide scope of discretion in using external material support for increasing state repression.

Considering the PA framework, the relationship between those two states suggests two notable problems. The first problem refers to an asymmetry in preferences whereby the US government, caught in the midst of a security crisis, provided foreign aid to its

allies on the basis that only armed communist insurgents and those involved in armed illegal drug cartels would be subjected to violent state repression. Due to the inherently fungible nature of foreign aid,¹⁵ many Colombian state agents, primarily those in the military, vowed to profit from the influx of US support through the killings of civilians, who were then falsely presented as armed combatants.¹⁶ The second problem pertains to the asymmetry in information. Considering the complexity of counterterror cooperation, it took some time for the broader leadership of the US government and the American public to know that Colombian forces were deliberately killing innocent civilians. In many ways, the lack of stringent control mechanisms in the use of foreign aid, as well as the flexible administrative discretion granted to Colombian armed forces, fomented those serious human rights abuses. In theoretical terms, the information asymmetry problem is aggravated when the principal guarantees wide autonomy for the agent to carry out the expected actions through a less restrictive design of control and system of checks and balances.¹⁷

In this case of its post-9/11 US–Colombia relations, what kind of transnational public good does the United States seek to produce? Both states seek to intensify their sense of regional and national political-military security, which, in this case, is a composite concept of two distinctive properties as explained by Barry Buzan:¹⁸

Military security concerns the two-level interplay of the armed offensive and defensive capabilities of states, and states' perceptions of each other's intentions. Political security concerns the organizational stability of states, systems of government, and the ideologies that give them legitimacy.

Thus, political-military security pertains to the shared interests of allied and friendly states' strategic considerations of their offensive and defensive capacities against perceived threats (state or non-state), together with their shared and individual competencies to preserve and promote their regimes, ideologies and common values. As such, my notion of security is one among the several conceptions of security identified by Elke Krahnmann,¹⁹ who defines 'the second meaning of security' as pertaining to 'existing threats that are suspended in the realm of possibility' and by having a 'link to the mechanism of deterrence with this meaning of security'.

Theoretically, there are several plausible reasons why secondary states agree to become agents of a powerful principal in the aim of bolstering what is supposed to be a mutual reinforcement of their sense of political-military security. First, despite the overwhelming capacities and resources that the principal (the United States) may have, the provision of transnational political-military security would not be possible without the aggregate efforts of other states. Especially in cases of transnational security threats such as non-state transnational terrorism, interstate cooperation is necessary and, at times, crucial to the perceived and perhaps actual success of providing a transnational public good. Scott Barrett²⁰ calls this problem of collective effort as an 'aggregate efforts public good' or 'where the global public good can only be produced through the aggregate efforts of multiple countries'. For that reason, Eyal Benvenisti's²¹ argument is inaccurate when it claimed that 'as the stronger military power, the US has both the ability and the motivation to provide the public good of global security unilaterally, while other

countries rely on international law to explain their inaction'. In fact, even a superpower, particularly the United States, needs to cooperate with other states to deal with transnational security threats.

Second, prospective secondary states may have some implicit or undisclosed interests that they seek to promote through co-optation with a hegemon; yet, the hegemon itself may not necessarily be interested in reinforcing *all* the goals of the weak ally, but would nonetheless tolerate such a cooperation. That is because interstate cooperation, however, is not absolute or unconditional in the sense that both parties have the same burden of work towards the provision of the public good. As an analogy, co-workers in any organization – universities, banks or even within a government bureau – do not need to have a *full* convergence of all their interests with their colleagues *just* to cooperate in a particular task. Similarly, if the US government's most compelling concern is to eliminate non-state terrorists that pose direct and immediate threat to American interests, even at the expense of some supposedly important but somehow seemingly dispensable (in their view) core values such as human rights, then US cooperation with 'partner states' with an acute human rights problem is possible. As I demonstrate in the next two sections, the US government cooperated with Colombia even when the government in Bogota had systematically killed civilians using US terror-oriented aid and political discourses. That only shows how full convergence of interests is not necessary. That important point has been missing in the influential literature on game theory vis-à-vis international cooperation, as the international law scholar Gregory Shaffer²² rightly contends:

the Prisoner's Dilemma game ignores another important obstacle to successful cooperation, namely conflicts among states with different interests over the distribution of the costs and benefits of cooperation. When states cooperate in international politics, they do not simply choose between 'cooperation' and 'defection', the binary choices available in PD games. They rather choose among specific terms of cooperation, which raise distributive issues.

Furthermore, how exactly does interstate cooperation in the provision of international security take place? What are the plausible conditions under which cooperation emerges? A mere cost-benefit analysis of the distributive consequences of cooperation and defection does not fully capture *how* and *why* primary political actors cooperate with each other. As I show in the case study, a hegemon, such as the United States, provides the basic scope, conditions and resources needed in regard to interstate security cooperation. Interstate cooperation is not reducible to a mere transactional, materialist-oriented and consequentialist mutual exchange of goods and benefits between and among involved states and actors. Instead of solely highlighting the materialist orientation of such a cooperative endeavour, my analytic narrative²³ of post-9/11 US-Colombia cooperation demonstrates that *strategic localization* or '*repackaging*' of *transnational security discourses*, usually emanating from the US foreign policy establishment and the Colombian state elites, facilitates the legitimization and the scope of cooperation and the ways in which it would be implemented in secondary partner states.

Derived from the constructivist approach in IR, this process of *strategic localization*²⁴ is a more nuanced form of securitization. In IR literature, the process of 'securitization' occurs when a given issue attains the status of security.²⁵ Specifically, securitization

occurs when ‘an issue is given sufficient saliency to win the assent of the audience, which enables those who are authorized to handle the issue to use whatever means they deem most appropriate’.²⁶ Thus, securitization is composed of three important steps: (1) the designation of an existential threat by an actor, (2) the actor’s assertion that such threat requires ‘emergency action or special measures’ and (3) the acceptance of such designation by a critical mass of the relevant public.²⁷ Notice here that the relevant actors such as the transnational and domestic elites primarily initiate the act of securitization, and the ultimate success of deploying specific causal beliefs, ideas and various justifications depends on whether the public ‘accepts’ such a framing. Through securitization, the state redefines the security problem, the ‘problematic’ actors that need to be addressed by the state, and the policies required in order to fulfil the newly defined goals of the state in light of the given security problem.

Securitization involves the creation of *new* causal and normative beliefs, ideas and arguments through non-material instruments called ‘discourses’. In short, ‘securitization’ – or *strategic localization* more precisely in this article – is ‘a process rather than a singular event’.²⁸ These discourses function as an action-oriented set of directions in which political actors can act upon.²⁹ Elites and key stakeholders use their material resources and socio-political privileges in order ‘to create, challenge, change or amend existing meaning structures, potentially establishing new discursive hegemonies in history’.³⁰ That is to say, they create and reinforce new public discourses in order to justify their chosen political actions, and, in many cases, to create new norms within the society. State actors and elites use various discursive tools in order to strategically interpret specific events as ‘key moments of change’ (e.g. 9/11 attacks), thereby requiring significant policy and institutional changes, and using the available ‘political opportunity structures’ to strategically pursue their aims.³¹

My notion of *strategic localization*, however, differs from Amitav Acharya’s³² ‘constitutive localization’, because I highlight how partner states’ elites and their allies redefine external norms as a *political strategy*, in which the quintessential goal is to enhance political authority and promote regime survival. Whereas Acharya seems to assume that ‘ideas do matter’, while apparently undermining the importance of material interests, the concept of strategic localization recognizes that local actors redefine external norms because of an underlying instrumentalist and materialist perspective. On that regard, Sikkink and Finnemore³³ rightly contended that ‘frequently heard arguments about whether behavior is norm-based or interest-based miss the point that norm conformance can often be self-interested, depending on how one specifies interests and the nature of the norm’. In other words, the strategic localization of security discourses is an integrative concept because it combines the logics of appropriateness and consequences into one causal process.³⁴ Hence, I recognize the underlying instrumentalist perspective that political actors consider on why and how they alter or embrace international norms. Indeed, it is also possible that secondary states’ leaders reinterpret international security threats and militaristic policy preferences in light of the domestic security and political contexts. In short, domestic actors in secondary partner states localize external norms in order to make them more appealing to their intended local recipients and transnational stakeholders (especially the United States).

Strategic localization has some concrete and substantial political and policy implications, especially in interstate cooperation. As I show in the case of Colombia, the partner government of the United States deviated from the initial scope of the targets of increased state repression in their own countries. Whereas the US government may have funded partner states of the war on terror to fight *armed* non-state enemies, aid recipient governments also added additional targets – some of which are *unarmed* sectors of the society – in order to consolidate their own regimes. The secondary partner governments implemented systematic repression of local and unarmed political dissidents – an effort that was neither explicitly encouraged nor permitted by the US government – in order to boost a perception of strength and authority of their own regimes. Indeed, the discourses and the quest to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of target audiences are crucial in justifying new policy measures involving foreign assistance (e.g. US counterterror assistance) and increased domestic state repression.

No wonder John Ruggie³⁵ asserted that we now live in what he called as ‘the new global public domain – an increasingly institutionalized transnational arena of discourse, contestation, and action concerning the production of global public goods, involving private as well as public actors’. For Ruggie,³⁶ that domain is a competitive space of ‘discourse, contestation, and action organized around the production of global public goods’. As such, Ruggie’s argument suggests that the intended provision of international political-military security as a public good is not only a materialist-oriented interstate transaction, whereby ‘success’ is counted by *materially* tangible political benefits such as the elimination or dramatic reduction of security threats. Instead, it is also an *ideational* competition of arguments that seek to justify, legitimize and normalize a chosen set of policy actions (scope of interstate cooperation and targets of repression, for instance), and in effect delegitimizing rival narratives.

This section deployed insights from constructivist IR literature, PA framework and security studies in order to understand how a powerful principal, such as the United States, provides global public goods, particularly international political-military security. Using insights from PA framework, I posit international political-military security as an impure global public good that is usually provided by a hegemon (global or regional) in cooperation with secondary partner states (even those located beyond the regional neighbourhood of the hegemon). As I show in the next section, I argue that our analysis of bilateral cooperation between states, especially during a security crisis, needs to go beyond the focus on materialist and strategic-motivational interests – that is, by including how a powerful state and its weaker allies reinterpret, legitimize and deploy political discourses in order to justify the scope and extent of their cooperation and its implementation patterns. Those theoretical insights will be illustrated in the case of post-9/11 US cooperation with Colombia, particularly in its ‘war on drugs’ as part of the broader American-led ‘war on terror’.

Discourses and policies: the US war on terror and Plan Colombia

For the last five decades or so, illegal drug trafficking and production in Colombia has been one of the most important security issues for many national policy-makers in Bogota and Washington, DC.³⁷ As such, Colombia ‘has long been viewed as the world’s

supermarket for illegal drugs like cocaine and a hotspot for related threats of violence, kidnappings, and guerrilla war'.³⁸ For that reason, US–Colombian bilateral relations include a wide range of political, economic and security interests; yet, the problem of illegal drugs being trafficked from Colombia to US soil has fundamentally shaped their diplomatic relations, albeit in varying substantive scope and magnitude over time.

The role of the US government in Colombia's long-standing war on drugs has a relatively long history. In fact, the US government under President Richard Nixon, during the early 1970s, began what would be a US-funded war on drugs in the Andean region, especially in Colombia. In the 1990s, just after the Cold War, the Clinton administration's priority in US–Colombia bilateral relations was to substantially undermine the trafficking and production of illegal drugs.³⁹ In terms of US assistance, such a diagnosis of the problem of illegal drugs meant that US aid to Colombia primarily focused on reinforcing the institutional capacities of the Colombian police and military forces, within a counterinsurgency framework. In the last decade or so, Colombia received large amounts of US aid intended to address the drug problem, particularly through Plan Colombia:⁴⁰

In 2000, the U.S. Congress authorized \$1.3 billion as the first installment of the U.S. contribution, which by 2005 would reach a total of \$4.5 billion. U.S. assistance under Plan Colombia surpassed all other aid packages the United States had ever provided to Latin American countries, and Colombia's annual allocations exceeded those of all other recipient nations except Israel and Egypt.

Yet, after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the Bush administration launched a global war on terror that fundamentally influenced the strategic priorities of America's bilateral relations with other key allies. Prior to 9/11, Plan Colombia was 'portrayed as a drug eradication effort, training, and supplying the Colombian army to target the country's coca fields and processing laboratories'.⁴¹ After the 9/11 attacks, US foreign policy shift towards counterterrorism altered the political discourses, by justifying the capacity-building efforts of Colombian armed forces and police agencies as well as the influx of huge amounts of US terror-oriented aid and political support. Thus, Colombia-based scholars Tickner and Cepeda⁴² maintained that the post-9/11 'global "war on terrorism"' was a new strategy for securitization on the part of the United States that linked within a single analytical framework a set of global threats, including illegal trafficking of drugs and weapons'. As part of the joint securitization strategy, American and Colombian political elites justified 'Plan Colombia' by positing the link between illegal drugs and terror groups, thereby coining a new term called 'narco-terrorism'.⁴³ Politically contentious terms such as 'narco-guerrilla' and 'narco-terrorism' highlighted the shift in the national security strategy of Bogota as well as US foreign policy in Colombia. Notably, those terms persistently became more prominent in political speeches, announcements and discourses of state officials in Bogota and Washington, DC.⁴⁴ This discursive linkage between illegal drugs and armed non-state terrorism only emerged after 2001, or 1 year after Plan Colombia was officially launched. Pizarro and Gaitan⁴⁵ clearly explained the motivations and processes of the sudden and quite unexpected discursive linkage between illegal drugs and non-state armed terrorism:

The events of September 11 left the debate between the Departments of State and Defense in the dust. Because of the FARC, ELN [*Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional*], and AUC [*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*] were no longer considered insurgent or counterinsurgent forces but terrorist groups, direct or indirect, combat against them was legitimized with a simple stroke of the pen. This perspective gained credibility as the pattern of linking illegal drug traffic with terrorism grew; after all, drug trafficking is one of the principal ways terrorist groups are financed, internally and within Colombia. *Debates in the US Congress over new antiterrorist legislation pave the way ... in 2001 at linking the fight against terrorism with fight against drugs.* (Emphasis mine)

In terms of policy, the Bush administration in early 2002 removed the ban on US military aid to Colombia, a decision that implied the merging of local counterinsurgency (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or the communist rebels in Colombia) strategy with the aims of counter-illegal drugs trafficking assistance. This also means that ‘Plan Colombia was the first time that the United States began significantly aiding Colombia’s military, as opposed to its police, for a counterdrug mission’.⁴⁶ In addition, after 9/11, the US State Department reclassified three illegal armed rebel groups (including the communist FARC) in Colombia as ‘foreign terror organizations’, which further legitimized the merging of counterdrug and counterterror strategies.⁴⁷ Strategically localized discourses about the link of terrorism and illegal drugs also facilitated general public acceptance of the expansion of the Colombian state apparatus primarily because ‘Uribe has increased the size of the military and police, largely through a one-time 1.2% war tax on wealthy individuals and businesses and created a “civilian informers” program’.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the discourses and actual policies complemented each other in ways that reflect key changes in the converging interests of the Bush and Uribe administrations. The core priority of Plan Colombia shifted after the 9/11 attacks, because:

U.S. policymakers did decide to fund increased Colombian military participation in counternarcotics as a central part of Plan Colombia, in belated recognition that the police could not operate in highly insecure areas on their own, even with extensive U.S. aid.⁴⁹

For the years 2000 to 2012, the US Congress committed to providing around 8 billion US dollars’ worth of counterterror assistance as Colombian forces implement Plan Colombia.⁵⁰ The Colombian government was supposed to use those funds to imbibe a ‘whole-of-government’ approach that places all non-militaristic policy issues (e.g. economic development) under the rubric of political-military security. By placing all other policy issues and domestic problems in Colombia under political-military security, the Colombian government harnessed the strategic ambiguity in the Bush administration’s war on terror discourses, thereby justifying a wide range of militaristic and violent state policies while repressing political dissent.⁵¹

In addition, America’s goal of restoring global and homeland security in the wake of the 9/11 attacks led to several transformative changes in the scope of military cooperation between American and Colombian armed forces.⁵² Starting in 2003, high-ranking officials in Washington, DC, and Bogota began the three-phase strategy of consolidating the war on drugs with the localized version of the global war on terror in Colombia.⁵³

First, US-supported Colombian armed forces and police officers were tasked to regain control of the various parts of the country that had been effectively governed by the FARC and other illegal armed rebel groups. Second, the Colombian government stationed permanent state agencies and police forces in those reacquired territories. Third, the reacquisition of territory was followed by the establishment of supportive civilian state agencies that provided other local public goods such as socio-economic development. With the effective strategic localization of post-9/11 US global war on terror in light of the Colombian problem on illegal drugs, the Embassy of the United States in Bogota, Colombia,⁵⁴ reports the following gains:

Recognizing that *terrorism and the illicit narcotics trade in Colombia are inextricably linked*, the U.S. Congress granted new expanded statutory authorities in 2002 making U.S. assistance to Colombia more flexible in order to better support *President Uribe's unified campaign against narcotics and terrorism*. In 2004, the Uribe government established, for the first time in recent Colombian history, a government presence in all of the country's 1,099 municipalities (county seats). Attacks conducted by illegally armed groups against rural towns decreased by 91% from 2002 to 2005. (Emphasis mine)

In terms of political discourses, both the Colombian and US governments devotedly exerted efforts in seeking for public acceptance of dramatic shifts in policy priorities. For sure, the overall shift in US foreign policy after 9/11 under the Bush administration has been well documented in the scholarly literature.⁵⁵ The Colombian government's elites, meanwhile, strategically shifted their policy priorities by repackaging the Plan Colombia, as it was conceived in 2000, into a more comprehensive counterterrorism and counterdrug initiative funded and supported by the US government.⁵⁶ For that reason, the Colombian government strategically reinterpreted the US war on terror in ways that directly spoke about the long-standing problem of illegal drugs and armed illegal rebel groups in the country.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe (2002–2010) and his allies used several discursive tactics in order to effectively shift the tone to a unified terror-oriented anti-illegal drugs strategy. First, the post-9/11 Colombian government reclassified any involved actor in the drug trafficking problem as 'terrorists', in consonance with the Bush administration's counterterrorism-oriented foreign policy. For instance, in responding to queries about granting political amnesty to rebels and abandoning militaristic policies, President Uribe discarded those peaceful means and upheld instead a counterterrorism approach: 'but in a context of 30,000 terrorists, it must be understood that a definitive peace is the best justice for a nation in which several generations have never lived a single day without the occurrence of a terrorist act'.⁵⁷ Moreover, issues about the primacy of human rights over public security also emerged as one of the key issues of policy compromises in post-9/11 security governance. On that regard, the official policy document from the Colombian Ministry of Defence (2003, chapter 1, para. 1, p. 12 & 15) hinted that human rights and other non-militaristic goals of a democratic government can only be achieved when *security* (in the militaristic sense) is upheld:⁵⁸

True security hinges on the capacity not only of the security forces to exercise the coercive power of the State, but also of the judiciary to guarantee the efficient administration of justice,

of the Government to fulfil the constitutional responsibilities of the State, and of Congress to legislate *without losing sight of security as the public good par excellence ... Human rights are the foundation and the raison d'être of the Constitution. If they are to have their full force, democracy must be sovereign and the State must be capable of upholding the law throughout the territory.* (Emphasis mine)

Such statements illustrated similarities of the Bush administration's prioritization of military security over human rights considerations with Uribe's 'Democratic Security' strategy. While the Colombian document acknowledged that human rights are fundamentally important as enshrined in the Constitution, the document, nonetheless, implied that the very possibility of such rights emerges from the state's ability to exact force and power throughout its territory – or military security gaining primacy over individual rights. Thus, the Uribe administration had to strategically reframe the causes of long-standing security problems by asserting that human rights *would not be possible* without increasing military security throughout the country, especially in several territories where illegal drug trafficking and production have been prevalent for decades. By framing human rights as subservient to military security, the Colombian government attempted to bolster the legitimacy of increased militarization and to justify renewed US interventionist policies in Colombia's drug problem. No wonder, it was in the post-9/11 period when the Bush–Uribe partnership 'ushered in the greatest level of counterdrug cooperation ever achieved between the United States and Colombia'.⁵⁹ As the only Latin American country that supported the US war on Iraq in 2003, which effectively made it the 'strongest regional ally in the war against terrorism',⁶⁰ the Colombian government received US assistance for Plan Colombia, whereby:

Between 70 and 80 percent of Plan Colombia assistance has been for counternarcotics and counterterrorism, and between 20 and 30 percent for 'soft' issues such as strengthening democracy and institutions as well as judicial reform, alternative development, refugee assistance, human rights, and many other purposes.⁶¹

To be sure, the White House also echoed the Colombian government's strategic discursive linkage between terrorism and illegal drugs, signalling the country's importance in the broader war on terror of the Bush administration:⁶²

In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups. We are working to help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed groups of both the left and right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provide basic security to the Colombian people. (The White House 2002, 10; emphasis mine)

The above-mentioned statement from a seminal US government document revealed the unprecedented and arbitrary expansion of what constitutes a 'security threat'. Prior to 9/11, the Colombian and US governments considered the armed communist rebel groups and illegal drug trafficking cartels as two distinctive security threats, a distinction that also required two separate and different strategies for addressing them. After 9/11, the

Bush and Uribe administrations promoted the idea that those two particular groups support each other through co-financing their rebellious activities.

Notably, as the National Security Strategy suggested in the above quotation, the US government considered the global war on terror – or Plan Colombia (early 2000s) and Plan Patriota (mid-2000s), as its localized manifestations in Colombia – as a militaristic approach to repressing *all* forms of illegal armed dissent, a policy choice that was justified by invoking compelling goals such as national and regional security. For those reasons, the White House at that time ‘has been a strong champion of Uribe’s policies of “democratic security” and has continued the high levels of military assistance initiated by the Clinton administration’.⁶³

Indeed, the political and policy discourses related to Plan Colombia and the US global war on terror reflected a strong sense of ambiguity to the extent that its interlocutors exploited them very well to their advantage. Particularly, the White House and other key US officials worried that a highly insecure Colombia could destabilize Central America in ways that could breed non-state terror groups, which can detrimentally affect US interests.⁶⁴ Those American political and economic interests converged quite well with the neoliberal interests of Colombian commercial elites and those of transnational corporations that were afraid of any form of instability in the Andean region.⁶⁵

Yet, there were also some indications that the Uribe-led government deviated from the official US policy stance, especially when the Colombian government castigated almost all forms of *political dissidence* in the context of the war on terror. As Paul Chambers⁶⁶ noted, the Uribe government ‘publicly denounced human rights activists as supporters of terrorism and cemented a dangerously authoritarian social consensus that facilitated the overriding of fundamental human rights in the name of “democratic security”’. In his official speech on 8 September 2003, at the time that Plan Patriota (second phase of Plan Colombia) was being inaugurated, President Uribe strongly criticized *unarmed* political dissidents by branding them as ‘writers and ideologues who ultimately give support to terrorism and who cravenly shield themselves with the banner of human rights’.⁶⁷

This strategic expansion in the scope of repression was not only limited to the Uribe-led government’s localized political discourses of the war on terror, as actual state policies ultimately led to the violent repression of unarmed political opposition actors in Colombia. As *The Washington Post* journalists Karen de Young and Claudia Duque’s investigations suggested:⁶⁸

American cash, equipment and training, supplied to elite units of the Colombian intelligence service over the past decade to help smash cocaine-trafficking rings, were used to carry out spying operations and smear campaigns against Supreme Court justices, Uribe’s political opponents and civil society groups.

Dubbed as the *Las Chuzadas* scandal, such revelations surprised US policy-makers and the Colombian public for the expansive scope of ‘widespread surveillance and wiretapping of key politicians, dissidents and human rights activists and led to the investigation by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights’.⁶⁹ Notwithstanding, the US–Colombian post-9/11 security partnership ‘influenced and shaped Mexican strategy preferences’, whereby ‘the state increased its coercive force to deal with organized crime, but

it did so at the expense of the society it claimed to protect' – thereby showing how policy strategies from the Colombia case were also adopted elsewhere in the region.⁷⁰

This section illustrated the ways in which the Colombian government strategically localized the US government's post-9/11 political discourses in ways that *both converged and deviated* from the explicitly publicized aims of the Bush administration. Particularly, the Uribe government in Colombia strategically linked armed non-state terrorism with illegal drug trafficking. On the part of the United States, the Bush administration also imbibed such a diagnosis, as it was explicated in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the White House. Consequently, the US and Colombian governments underscored political-military security in their policy discourses and implemented concrete security policies in Colombia, where the Uribe-led government placed non-militaristic policy goals under the overarching aim of political-military security. Yet, such a militaristic *convergence* of political discourses and security policies also had its limitations. The Uribe administration *deviated* from the publicized aims of the Bush administration by apparently reframing many non-violent forms of political oppositions as 'terroristic', thereby making them legitimate targets of the US-supported increased state repression in Colombia. In so doing, a human rights scandal erupted in Colombia, which, in effect, instigated an outcry from American foreign policy-makers and other relevant political actors in Colombia. The next section characterizes the human rights crisis that was facilitated by the actual discourses and security policies of the US-supported Colombian government and armed forces.

Human rights abuses in post-9/11 Colombia

The renewed security cooperation between Bogota and Washington, DC, after the 9/11 attacks impacted the intensity and scope of state-led political violence and physical integrity rights abuses in Colombia. Facilitated by the Bush administration's discursive political support and counterterror aid, the increase in violent state repression in Colombia led to the widespread killings of civilians. In the important quantitative study by Dube and Naidu,⁷¹ the authors found that 'US military assistance leads to differential increases in attacks by paramilitaries', which were commissioned by the Colombian armed forces and funded by the US government. The study confirms how the influx of US aid within the overarching counterterror agenda facilitated a substantial increase in violent and repressive activities. In fact, a broad-based coalition of Colombian and US-based civil society organizations confirmed how the US-led counterterror foreign policy towards Bogota enabled state repression not only of violent targets but also of civilians during the years 2000 to 2010:⁷²

Based on data on 5,763 reported executions in Colombia and extensive documentation of U.S. assistance to the Colombian military, we found a positive correlation between the units and officers that received U.S. assistance and training, and the commission of extrajudicial killings.

Figure 1 shows the notable increase in the number of civilian deaths that peaked in the early 2000s, when the Colombian government intensified violent state repression in the context of narco-terrorism and war on terrorism. The influx of counterterror aid and

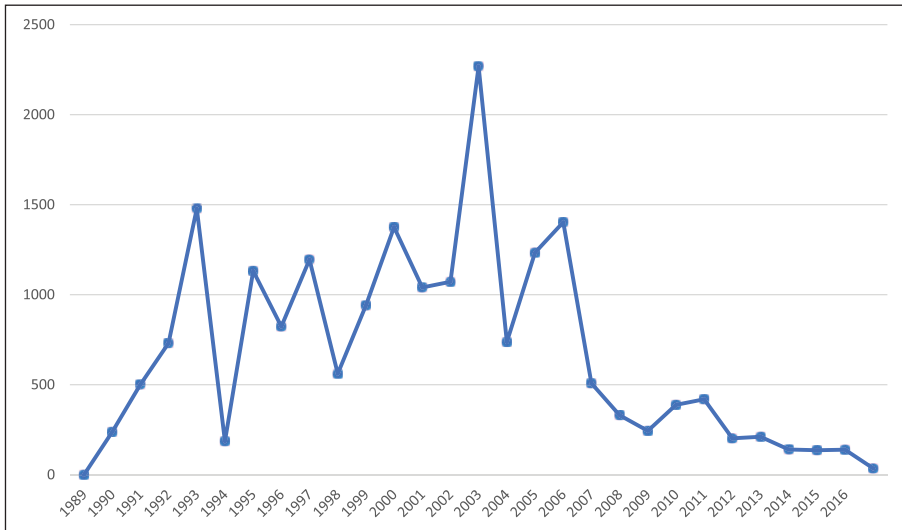


Figure 1. Number of civilian deaths by state-based violence in Colombia.

Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (<http://ucdp.uu.se/>).⁷³

proliferation of militaristic discourses under the US-sponsored Plan Colombia (2000–2003) and Plan Patriota (second phase, 2003 onwards) coincided with the substantial number of civilian deaths caused by state forces.⁷⁴ Notably, the absolute amount of US counterterror aid declined since 2008,⁷⁵ when the ‘false positives’ scandal emerged and the US Congress launched a public hearing about the human rights abuses in Colombia. That decline in US aid in the late 2000s coincided with the decline in the number of civilian deaths due to state abuses, as shown in the graph.

Who were the targets of these state-led repressive activities? Winifred Tate⁷⁶ maintained that Colombian armed forces and political leaders regularly shamed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and peaceful civil society leaders as ‘guerilla sympathizers, guerillas in disguise, or generally leftist, in an effort to undermine their work’ (p. 23). In fact, the Department of Administrative Security (DAS), Colombia’s top intelligence agency, formulated and vigorously implemented what was then called ‘Operation Halloween’.⁷⁷ The goal of the operation was to undermine NGOs and civil society actors, break the unity within opposition parties and movements, create false links to guerilla and rebel groups in order to destroy the reputation of human rights activities and subvert the institutional legitimacy of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Empowered by US–Colombian counterterror strategies and financial support, local paramilitary groups were crucial in the widespread and systematic killings of both armed rebels and civilians. Yet, state and paramilitary actors took advantage of the discursive ambiguity of the US-led war on terror by expanding the scope of domestic state repression. In fact, the Colombian government used terror-oriented discourses by labelling dissident working-class activists as ‘subversives’.⁷⁸ These civilian activists actively advocated for

labour rights and opposed neoliberal economic reforms, a political stance that made them direct targets of Colombia's counterterror cooperation.

Even worse, the sinister element of this bilateral cooperation points to how the individual Colombian state agents instrumentalized counterterror discourses and the influx of US foreign aid in ways that would promote their own perverse ulterior motives, thereby deviating from the principal international human rights commitments of the United States and Colombia. Amid the 2008 'false positives' scandal (also known as 'cash-for kills'), independent legal prosecutors estimated that Colombian soldiers and state-sponsored paramilitary forces murdered around 3000 civilians nationwide, dressed them in a way similar to guerilla agents and presented them as armed rebels.⁷⁹ The horrible consequences of post-9/11 US–Colombia counterterror cooperation to the rights and dignity of Colombian civilian lives were brought by the discursive and policy integration of the global illegal drug trade with the various militarization projects of the United States and Colombia.⁸⁰ While issues of armed non-state rebellion and illegal drug production are outcomes of complex socio-economic processes and should have been combatted by a comprehensive domestic law enforcement policy paradigm, the US–Colombian strategy imbibed instead a militaristic and repressive approach.

Conclusion

Political-military security is neither an exclusively material nor purely ideational transnational public good; rather, it is an outcome of discursive expressions and material actualization of relevant public policies that two or more states (specifically, national governments) enact based on a *partial* convergence of shared expectations. It is partial because interstate cooperation, for the purposes of maintaining a public good such as transnational/regional security, emerges when cooperating states only converge on those goals that are usually perceived as compelling and urgent.

Why are ideas, political discourses and shared expectations crucial to the legitimization and policy actualization of a public good such as international security? Why did the US and Colombian governments had to strategically reframe their discourses over time, as it occurred right after the 9/11 attacks? First, in the aim of maintaining a club good such as US-oriented regional security in Latin America, self-professed and long-standing liberal democratic allies such as the United States and Colombia are expectedly accountable to their domestic publics. That means that shifts in policy strategies *ought* to be perceived as legitimate – a motivation that compelled Colombia's strategic localization of American terror-oriented discourses. Second, political actors exploit the inherent ambiguity of counterterror discourses by providing simplified and perhaps fabricated causal explanations, and in doing so, they attempted to legitimize dramatic policy shifts from the status quo. Third, the strategic localization processes employed by the Colombian government show how agents can skilfully diverge from the publicly stated preferences of its principal – an outcome likely driven by what Eric Grynviski⁸¹ calls as 'false intersubjective beliefs' (FIBs). For instance, the facts about the 'false positives' likely remained unknown to the most important policy-makers in the US government's executive branch, at least before the eruption of the scandal in 2008. As Grynviski argues, 'FIBs ... account for many of the most important cases of

cooperation in international politics’, and they ‘make us think that a belief is shared, tricking us into cooperating when we otherwise would not’.⁸² In the absence of strict mechanisms for checks and balances, political and material support provided by the principal are likely to be diverted to unintended goals because agents are able to deceive their principal. This tactic of strategic deception on the part of the agent becomes easier especially when the existential survival of the principal (state security and its hegemonic interests) is perceived to be at stake, as that was the case after the 9/11 attacks.

A militaristic approach to illegal drugs is likely to produce more societal problems,⁸³ including a human rights crisis as shown by the case of Colombia. Thus, the terror-oriented approach of Washington, DC, and Bogota should not be haphazardly applied in other countries. Alternatively, states and global governance institutions are likely to be more effective and legitimate if the illegal drugs problem is treated as a public health issue, while also strengthening criminal justice institutions in order to avoid the emergence of a potential human rights crisis.⁸⁴

Finally, the post-9/11 attacks in the United States motivated political elites in Washington, DC, to recalibrate its global security strategy in unprecedented ways in an attempt to defend a US-dominated global order. ‘Order’ or ‘global security’, in this context, is considered a transnational club good that needs to be primarily maintained by a hegemonic actor such as the United States. Yet, the management of such a club requires cooperation or co-optation with the allies of the hegemon – an important point that refutes canonical hegemonic stability literature, which asserts that ‘because of the free-rider problem ... a single leader is necessary for the provision of public good of international stability’.⁸⁵ Bruce Russett⁸⁶ was right when he argued that ‘the characterization of hegemonic America as predominantly supplying itself and others with collective goods is inaccurate, and for those goods that can be correctly be called collective, the United States has not paid disproportionate costs’. That is certainly the case with US relations with Latin America, especially Colombia, where US economic and political interests remain crucial.

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