

**Colombian police and military schools and training in Colombia: from  
“problematic country” to “problem-solver country”?**

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**Colombia: the disease and the cure**

Certainly the most recurrent angle through which Colombia is known to the world is that of violence. Since its independence, the history of Colombia has been printed with violent disputes, being the Thousand Days War and *La Violencia* only two among numerous examples of violent confrontations that have taken place in the country. The multiplication of guerrillas from the 1960s to the 1980s, the multiplication of paramilitaries since the 1980s, and the countless confrontations that have ever since characterized the daily life in Colombia, have added scale and complexity to the picture.

The diagnoses on the “problematic Colombia” too often go beyond the identification of a problem *within* Colombia. Throughout the lasting persistence of the armed conflict in the country, the list of variables added to the equation of violence has only increased: narcotraffic, terrorism, internal displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, environmental damage... Most of these factors are considered to be inherently transnational and, in this sense, speaking about Colombia has generally come to mean speaking about a “problematic country”, not circumscribed to itself, but constituting a source of problems to the region and to the world (ALBRIGHT, 1999; RAMÍREZ, 2004; GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2006; ROJAS, 2006).

Identifying Colombia's pathologies has stimulated a series of efforts aimed at explaining these pathologies, mostly with the objective of solving the problems of the country. The "geographic factor", for example, has been raised as an element which, associated with a set of other troublesome aspects, made the integration of the country and the circulation within it difficult (BUSHNELL, 1993, pp. 134-5; SAFFORD; PALACIOS, 2002, pp. 1-11). The relative isolation of some parts of the country has challenged the governmental institutions to reach some regions, as well as it has eased the proliferation of armed groups out of the administrative center's control. The precarious infrastructure that has characterized the country at least until the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in a deficient collection of taxes and duties by the central government, by then, the main source of government revenue despite the prevalence of contraband (BUSHNELL, 1993, p. 77). The deficiencies in the collection have contributed to weaken state institutions, thus generating a cycle within which violent practices – both by the state and by the population – found a fertile ground. This very lack of infrastructure has fueled a persistent tension between centralization and decentralization in Colombia's territory, which itself has triggered violent confrontations among partisans of each side. Also, the disputes between the two main parties – Liberal and Conservative – have performed as explaining variable to the countless violent chapters in Colombia's history (BUSHNELL, 1993; SAFFORD; PALACIOS, 2002). Most recently, the claim of an intersection between greed and grievance (COLLIER, 2000; ARNISON, 2005) in most of the armed groups in Colombia<sup>1</sup> was the basis of explanations about the protracted character of the contemporary armed conflict in Colombia, as well as about the difficulties in achieving successful results in the negotiation efforts undertaken towards these groups.

The mosaic of explanations attempting to account for the pathologies identified in Colombia also characterizes the diversity of readings and engagements of external parties towards Colombia. In this context, the United States has, by far, been the main source of external aid to Colombia: from 1996 to 2013, the United States has provided US\$ 7.1 billion only to military and police assistance (ISACSON; HAUGAARD, 2013, p. 20). The amount provided by and the pervasive involvement of successive US governments in the Andean country makes it almost impossible for one to think about

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<sup>1</sup> Mainly the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense of Colombia (AUC).

Colombia without mentioning the US. A myriad of other countries and organizations have also engaged with the Colombian government. Cuba, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Venezuela are only a few in a long list of countries which have attempted to facilitate an agreement between the guerrillas and the Colombian governments since the 1980's (BAGLEY; TOKATLIAN, 1985; VILLA; OSTOS, 2005). The European Union has also played a significant role in Colombia, always emphasizing the contrasts of its approach with the one advanced by the US (BARRIOS, 2003; RAMÍREZ, 2006). According to the EU, its main project in Colombia is the Peace Laboratory<sup>2</sup>, initiative on alternative development implemented and co-managed by the local communities. Additionally, it is possible to single out the engagement of the Organization of American States (OAS) in the demobilization of paramilitaries since 2005, through the creation of the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OEA) (VIOLANTE, 2007; VILLA; VIANA, 2012).

Although the stigma of a “problematic country” still surrounds Colombia, the dismantling of the drug cartels, the demobilization of the main paramilitary groups, the gradual weakening of the FARC and, since the Juan Manuel Santos administration, the negotiations for a peace agreement with this guerrilla, as well as the decline in key indicators of violence, including kidnappings, homicides, IDPs etc. are aspects which have allowed the Colombian military and police to transform their experience in the conflict into an expertise on the conflict – hence, to put themselves in the position to teach others.

This paper is an initial effort to understand the position of Colombia in terms of security cooperation in Latin America, precisely by looking to the conditions that have allowed this claim of an acquired expertise to find resonance in the region. The paper also aims at providing some initial analytical paths for us to think about possible effects of the position of Colombia of what I call a hub in the circuit of security practices in the region. In a broader picture, I claim that looking at Colombia is important for us to understand much of what goes on in Latin America in terms of circulation of practices regarding police and military.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, page 17 of the document E/2007/484, approved by the European Commission in 28 March 2007 and entitled *Colombia. Country Strategy Paper (2007-2013)*. Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/colombia/csp/07\\_13\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/colombia/csp/07_13_en.pdf).

### **Armed forces without a nation**

The trajectory of police and military in Colombia has been as stigmatized as the country itself. After the failed experience of *Gran Colombia*, there was great suspicion towards Venezuelan military in New Granadan soil. In this context, the maintenance of a set of privileges to the military – such as the *fueros*, which exempted members of the armed forces from the jurisdiction of the ordinary courts – was seen as a “relic of colonialism incompatible with notions of republican equality before law” (BUSHNELL, 1993, p. 85). By then – and for some time later on –, most of the military were associated with lack of educational background (Bushnell, 1993, p. 87). In addition to that, the disdain towards the armed forces resulted in successive reductions in its outlays, for its share in the national budget was the largest one. As Bushnell underlines, “[t]he size of the military establishment was kept under strict control, with the authorized force level hovering around 3,300 men, or one for every 500 inhabitants, more or less” (1993, p. 87).

The idea of the military as a threat to the consolidation of republican ideals in Colombia has persisted throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The disputes between the two parties and the militias which were supportive to each of these political groups reverberated in the armed forces, making it difficult even to consider the existence of a national army or police force by that time. These tensions were used as justification for the approval of Law No. 72 in 1930 by the Conservative government, whereby members of the Colombian Armed Forces<sup>3</sup> were prohibited from voting in elections. The measure was taken under the argument that those officers were far from alien to the political disputes between the two parties: indeed, the government considered them to be a force loyal to the Liberal Party (BUSHNELL, 1993, p. 119, p. 196; BECERRA, 2011, p. 258). Years later, with the rise of Liberals to power, the claim to take place was that the Police could almost be considered as an armed branch of the Conservative Party.

It is in this context that efforts of professionalization and nationalization must be read in Colombia: they constitute an attempt to consolidate a body of well-trained

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, In Colombia, the Army and the National Police are branches of the Armed Forces. The chief of the Armed Forces responds directly to the Ministry of Defense, and the latter responds to the President.

officers, comprehending the national territory and presenting a technical character – thus, contrasting to the localism and partisan loyalty networks that had thus far characterized the armed forces. In order to contribute to this challenge, several foreign missions were invited to Colombia, and many armed forces officers were sent abroad to upgrade their skills and knowledge on strategy. Most of the police and military sent abroad were high-ranked<sup>4</sup>: the Decree No. 1646 (1928), for instance, determined that police officers holding chief positions, fulfilling criteria such as undergraduate educational level and knowledge on Penal Law, were sent to countries such as Italy, France and the United States (BECERRA, 2011, p. 256).

The foreign missions aimed at providing assistance to the professionalization and nationalization processes were of various origins and have visited Colombia in different contexts, dating back to the colonial period. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century most of them were sent in order to help building schools for police and military. The first military schools established after independence have existed for a considerably short period, having had their teaching and training programs interrupted by violent confrontations. To mention but a few examples: the School of Civil and Military Engineering (*Escuela de Ingeniería Civil y Militar*), created by the Decree 632 of 1880 was extinguished five years later due to a civil war; the Military School of Cadets (*Escuela Militar de Cadetes*) was created in 1896 and closed in 1899 due to another civil conflict. These two schools had, respectively, the American lieutenant Henry Rowan Lemly and the French captain Émile Drouhard<sup>5</sup> as the chief instructors.

The “on-off effect” of violent confrontations over the attempts of establishing military schools has only strengthened discourses on the necessity of counting on foreign missions in order to overcome the “politicization degree” that had pervaded the Colombian armed forces. Indeed, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen an intensive movement of foreign missions aimed at modernizing the army: right after the end of the Thousand Days War (1899-1902), Colombia has received military missions from Chile (1907; 1909-1911; 1911-1913; and 1913-1915), Switzerland (1924-1933),

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<sup>4</sup> This feature persists in the contemporary context: a quick glance at the profiles of the Colombian army’s chain of command reveal their educational background in other countries. See: <<http://www.ejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=189546>>.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=192269>. Access on: 6 Nov. 2014.

Germany (1929-1934) and France (1939) (BUSHNELL, 1993, p. 157, p. 193; SAFFORD; PALACIOS, 2002, p. 283).

Likewise, the efforts towards modernizing and nationalizing the Colombian police through foreign missions can be illustrated by the Spanish mission contracted by the Colombian government in 1930s in order to prepare the bases for the creation of the Colombian School of Technical Police (*Escuela Colombiana de Policía Técnica*) (BECERRA, 2011, p. 261). Nevertheless, the recommendations of this mission were not implemented, except for the creation of the National Department of Identification, in charge of issuing citizenship cards.

The diversity of foreign missions that has characterized the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not found in the following period. The creation of the School of the Americas, in 1946, and the reformulation of its scope in 1961 towards anti-communist counterinsurgency training, in the context of the Alliance for Progress, are among the analytical elements that allow us to understand, firstly, the predominance of the United States as the “foreign” with which Colombia counted from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on in matters of security cooperation; and, secondly, the central position of military operations in the domestic context in Colombia. These elements, however, were not enough for the Colombian armed forces to be considered “professional”, “modern” and “technical”. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Colombian army was stigmatized not only by several defeats against the FARC, but also by several corruption scandals; and the Colombian Police was incapable of keeping order, as the drug cartels’ strength by 1980s and 1990s show.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, the Colombian National Police has received from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) capacity building on intelligence and seizure of drug cartel leaders. Also, during Ernesto Samper’s administration (1994-1998), the Colombian army was found in the center of scandals of corruption connected to the drug cartels. In this context, Clinton’s administration chose to maintain the flow of resources to Colombia, but focused its cooperation with the Colombian National Police, which became the main beneficiary of the modernization, training and financial resources provided by the United States at that time (CRANDALL, 2001; 2002). To the Armed Forces, it was only left the support to the counter-narcotics operations undertaken by the Police.

By their turn, the military in Colombia was considered to be weak in terms of number of personnel and equipment until the end of the 1990s when they were placed at the center of the modernization and training practices led by the United States in Colombia. Indeed, the “*Toma de Miraflores*” in 1998 was coined as the greatest defeat of the army to the FARC. In the following year, the United States have supported the creation of the antinarcotics battalions and trained 931 of its soldiers through the SouthCom (ROJAS, 2006, p. 50). It is only with the approval of Plan Colombia, that the Colombian government triggers an intensive modernization and training of the army. As signaled by a report developed by the RAND Corporation, the cooperation led by the United States triggered policies aimed at developing an integrated system of communication; ameliorating techniques of data collection and processing; integrating terrestrial and aerial forces; and creating a control mechanism for rivers. In this same direction, between 2000 and 2001, fast operation brigades, navigation and communication teams and five additional counter-narcotics battalions were created (RABASA; CHALK, 2002, p. 65).

Under Plan Colombia, the armed forces have not only received massive training, but also equipment and infrastructure, as illustrated by the Military Fortress of Tolemaida (Fuerte Militar de Tolemaida), where the National Training Center (Centro Nacional de Entrenamiento-CENAE) is based. Founded in the 1950s, Tolemaida has received investments within the context of Plan Colombia, aiming at ameliorating its infrastructure and transforming it into a center of excellence in military training. Indeed, although the Colombian soldiers still constitute vast majority of the militaries trained in the facilities of CENAE, the fortress has been increasingly hosted courses to foreign students.

In the following section, I will explore how the Colombian governments have undertaken efforts aimed at changing the image of its armed forces and how this re-writing of the image of the latter was accompanied by the positioning of Colombia as a reference in military training in the region in the most recent years.

### **Exporting (whose) security model?**

Interestingly, both under the narrative of a “problematic country” and that of a “problem-solving country”, the Army and the National Police have been placed as

central instruments of counternarcotic, counterguerrilla and counterterrorist policies. Indeed, the “Democratic Security Policy” emphasizes the relevance of these actors to the preservation of the “state of law” in Colombia<sup>6</sup>. In the same line, president Juan Manuel Santos has recently qualified the Colombian Armed Forces as “the backbone of democracy”<sup>7</sup>.

However, it seems too simplistic to claim that the Army and the National Police have merely *been placed* as *key instruments*, for they have also played a remarkable proactive role in claiming themselves as the key actors in the making of the nation. Indeed, the names of the plans comprising the operations undertaken by the army and the police provide a historiography of the combat against the guerrillas: Patriot Plan (*Plan Patriota*), Victory Plan (*Plan Victoria*) and Consolidation Plan (*Plan Consolidación*). First, the challenge to build a nation, then the victory, and the triumphal story continues with the territorial consolidation aimed by Consolidation Plan, launched in 2007, as a more comprehensive approach, once circumscribing social and economic development among its priorities.

In the same line, in 2009, the Colombian Army has launched the motivation campaign entitled “Heroes, in Colombia they do exist” (“*Los héroes en Colombia sí existen*”), constituted by six TV commercials revealing the conditions under which the army soldiers work in Colombia. Most of the videos take place in the jungle, and they all suggest a routine of sacrifice, once requiring strength, discipline, distance from their families, as well as difficulty in transportation and mobility. In all the videos, the soldiers repeat variations of the same line: “Although I do not know you, I am willing to give my life for you” (“*A pesar de que no lo conozco, estoy dispuesto a dar la vida por usted*”)<sup>8</sup>. Considered as successful by the Ministry of Defense, the campaign was enhanced by a complementary initiative of motivation, entitled “I bring you in my heart” (“*Te llevo en mi corazón*”), launched in 2012. The campaign aims at encouraging Colombian children and Colombian citizens from all parts of the country to write letters to the soldiers and policemen, demonstrating gratitude and support for the work they have been advancing in Colombia<sup>9</sup>. In the same year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: <http://www.oas.org/csh/spanish/documentos/Colombia.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/santos-llama-calificar-servicios-al-general-barrero/377689-3>

<sup>8</sup> See all the videos here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ai5PpyfLSEw>.

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=354159>.



has officially joined the campaign, aiming at encouraging letters from Colombians living outside the country.

The crystallization of an image of hero to the Armed Forces officers provides a colorful picture to what could be a troublesome story. Indeed, speaking of recovering territories once upon a time lost by the Colombian state to the guerrillas' control, or even of the consolidation that is yet to be seen of a state, could be stories about a future of uncertainties and about a present of unrest. But if you add heroes to the story, the troublesome aspects are somehow attenuated: the agony towards the present gives room to the confidence that heroes are taking care of it, and the uncertainty turns into the certainty that the future is bright.

The above mentioned campaigns launched by the Ministry of Defense play a double role of motivating the Armed Forces, as well as the support of Colombian citizens to these soldiers and policemen. In this sense, these stories about a nation being built by heroes are based upon the idea that the Armed Forces are the legitimate entrepreneurs of this task. These stories of achievement are told against the backdrop of tragedies: stories about how the guerrillas, paramilitaries, narcotraffic and terrorism have corrupted Colombia's democratic institutions and turned it into a "narcodemocracy", politics into "parapolitics" or "narcopolitics", citizens in victims. The legitimate character of the Armed Forces is also reaffirmed every time the enemy they are fighting is qualified as illegal armed groups. The crystallization of a narrative about the threat to the nation was built upon the damage that narcotraffic has caused to the democratic institutions of Colombia. Also, the overlapping categories of guerrilla, narcoguerrilla, narcoterrorist (VIANA; VIGGIANO, 2013) and criminal/delinquent – which are randomly used in the reporting of operations held by the National Police and the army – suggest not only the complexity of the challenge (for instance, through the combination of the danger of the guerrilla with that of the narcotraffic; or of that of terrorist organizations with that of narcotraffic) but also its increasing pervasiveness (exemplified by the use of criminal and terrorist to refer to the same group).

This re-writing of the armed forces image was both instrument and effect of an effort to position Colombia as a center of excellence in military training in the region. Recently, Colombia has come to use its so-claimed experience in security to train public forces of other countries. According to the International Affairs Office of the Colombian National Police, 21,949 police and military, from 47 different countries

were trained in Colombia between 2009 and 2013 (TICKNER, 2014, p. 2). Another example is the Lancers School (*Escuela de Lanceros*), one of the nine training schools in Fuerte Tolemaida, which, in April 2013, concluded its 367th course, having resulted in the capacity building of Colombian militaries and also of 582 “international students”, from 19 different countries (among which Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Peru and United States)<sup>10</sup>. Also, a document by the Brazilian Ministry of Defense suggests that the transit of Brazilian militaries in CENAE is quite busy: in January, February and March 2012, the same captain has been in Tolemaida to elaborate and submit the test for the School of Jungle (*Escuela de Selva – ESSEL*); a coronel has visited the fortress in April of the same year to elaborate and submit the test for the De-activation of Mines Course; a captain has also been to Tolemaida in April for the same purpose<sup>11</sup>. The same document singles out the results achieved by three soldiers that participated in courses held in Tolemaida. In 2012, Tolemaida has also hosted the America’s Antiterrorist Olympics. Funded by the US Southern Command, this is a competition of soldiers from countries in the hemisphere, aimed at “strengthening the relations among members of the Armed Forces in the Americas, as well as sharing skills, techniques and tactics in the fight against terrorism”<sup>12</sup>.

As for the Colombian National Police, after years of training by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and after having seized 44 leaders of narcotrafic organizations, the Colombian National Police has acquired experience in intelligence gathering, search and seizure of criminal organizations. In 2009, the Colombian National Police has trained 609 officers from Latin American and African countries. Most of these trainings were provided in the area of intelligence (130) and police operations (114). It is also noteworthy that 254 people were trained through Colombian schools: this number includes 123 people from Brazil’s Security Force; and 62 from the Mexican Federal Police (POLICÍA NACIONAL DE COLOMBIA, 2010, p. 53). In addition to that, the journal *Revista Criminalidad* is an interesting platform through which these “best practices” are disseminated and in which it is possible to constantly find articles signed by other countries’ police professionals and academics – most

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<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.cenae.mil.co/?idcategoria=344179>.

<sup>11</sup> Available at: [http://portal.dgp.eb.mil.br/almq1/boletins/MISEXT/Adt4\\_MISEXT/2012/Adt4MISEXT\\_BolDGP\\_nr57de18Jul2012.pdf](http://portal.dgp.eb.mil.br/almq1/boletins/MISEXT/Adt4_MISEXT/2012/Adt4MISEXT_BolDGP_nr57de18Jul2012.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> See: [http://dialogo-americas.com/pt/articles/rmisa/features/regional\\_news/2012/06/14/feature-ex-fuerzas-comando3](http://dialogo-americas.com/pt/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2012/06/14/feature-ex-fuerzas-comando3)

recurrently from Venezuela and Mexico. The latter is the country which has had more than 10,000 police and military trained in Colombia from 2009 to 2013 (TICKNER, 2014, p. 3).

One can easily jump to the conclusion that the high number of police and military being trained in Colombia is an evidence that this country has been exporting its “security model”. Nevertheless, this reading demands caution. Firstly, because the image of the hero, although strongly supported, is consistently challenged not only by the persistence of paramilitary groups in some of the regions of the country and of the guerrillas and narcotraffic, but also by scandals that taint this re-written image of the heroes of democracy – the “false positives” is one of the main examples in this sense. Secondly, the position of Colombia as a center of excellence in military and police training should not be directly interpreted as an export of an authentically Colombian formula which is being sold to other countries. Rather, this position is possible because Colombia itself has received training from American military at the School of the Americas, as well as from the US Special Forces – as in the case of the counternarcotic battalions –, the DEA, FBI and CIA. Moreover, as we have seen with the example of Brazil, some of the teachers providing training in Tolemaida are not Colombians. Last but not least, as it was already mentioned, the material conditions that make it possible for Colombia to affirm itself as a center of excellence in security training are closely connected to the United States. If we take the example of the CENAE, its facilities were upgraded during the Plan Colombia.

Considering the aspects that have been raised, it seems plausible to question both the idea that Colombia is merely “transmitting a message” (that of the US) and that it is exporting an “authentic Colombian security model”. Indeed, the expertise Colombian police and military claim to have acquired was built through training programs mainly provided by the US, and these programs have allowed Colombia to become a kind of intermediary, with credentials enough to provide these courses. But it would be wrong to assume that the training’s content is not changed by the particularities presented to police and military in the theater of operations. Likewise, it doesn’t seem plausible that the doctrines guiding, in their respective countries, the work of the officers being trained in Colombia do not change through the experiences sharing that takes place in these training programs. Rather, it seems more appropriate to think of a translation process, through which the content taught in these training programs is rearticulated in light of

the particularities of the contexts in different Latin American countries. Although further research is needed in order to support this idea, it seems more plausible to think that this translation process ends up rewriting doctrines that were once taught.

### **Preliminary remarks**

Drawing on the identification of a puzzle in which Colombia, for long stigmatized as a “problematic country”, has recently positioned itself as a hub of police and military training in Latin America. Intrigued by this dynamic, the paper has considered with a question mark the hypothesis of Colombia being an exporter of its security model. This has been made through three main angles: i) the Colombian police and military officers who now teach and train their Latin American counterparts were themselves trained elsewhere, mainly in the United States; ii) among those in charge of training police and military of Latin American countries in Colombia, there are professionals from other countries, such as Brazil and the United States; and iii) the position of Colombia as a center of excellence in military and police training rely on a set of material conditions – such as equipment and infrastructure –, which were (and still are) provided by the United States.

As we have also seen, the circulation of so-called models of security or public order is not an exclusive feature of the recent timeframe: since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Colombia has received foreign delegations from countries such as Chile, France, Spain, and the United States. What is interesting in this most recent dynamic, however, is that it takes place after a long period – at least since the 1960s in Latin America and since the 1980s unequivocally in Colombia – of predominance of the United States as the main interlocutor of Latin American countries in security matters.

In this sense, the discussion here presented provides initial elements for us to consider Colombia not as a producer and exporter of an “authentic Colombian security model”, but as a hub in a circuit of expertise, whose transmission currents are still blurry given the lack of information available and of studies produced on the subject. Further research is needed on this puzzle in order to explore the role of the United States in this circuit, how this circuit has contributed to Colombia to reformulate its own security policies and how this circuit rewrites – if it does – a military doctrine that has been historically elaborated by the United States.

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