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Colombian Military Culture

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Introduction

Colombian military institutions have historically been shaped more by the imperative of internal security—driven by protracted armed conflict—than by the requirements of external defense or the traditional exercise of Westphalian sovereignty. In contrast to many of their regional counterparts, the Colombian Armed Forces have maintained a low level of direct political involvement, upholding their status as apolitical, non-deliberative bodies grounded in constitutional principles.

This framework began in the 1950s, as national elites established distinct prerogatives and sources of authority for the political and military classes following a short-lived military government that put an end to a period of bloody partisan conflict. Although civilian leaders have retained civilian control of the armed forces since this period, presidents of all political stripes have afforded the military a high degree of autonomy in managing public order. Indeed, legal instruments such as the state of internal commotion and the classification of illegal armed groups as terrorist organizations facilitated an expanded role for the military in the country’s social and political life.

A major shift in the civil-military balance accompanied the signing of the 1991 Constitution, which strengthened mechanisms of civilian oversight beginning with the appointment of civilian defense ministers. Thereafter, the fight against narcotrafficking and the need to develop more effective capabilities to address internal security threats drove processes of professionalization and modernization. In the context of regional insecurity emanating from Colombia, one of the key factors in strengthening the military has been its close cooperation with the United States, especially during the Global War on Terrorism.

I. Cultural and Institutional Context

Foundational Norms and Values

The Colombian Armed Forces derive their institutional ethos from a foundational respect for the supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law. Military leaders emphasize their commitment to the construction and protection of the nation-state and, in recent years, have explicitly incorporated human rights and international humanitarian law as core doctrinal principles.

Internally, the institution prioritizes professionalism, rigorous discipline, and continuous education as the primary benchmarks for officer evaluation and career progression. Beyond the conscripted ranks, military service typically represents as a lifelong vocation of dedication to a higher purpose, reinforced by institutional values including “country, honor, and loyalty” and slogans such as “faith in the cause,” which endeavor to bolster the ethical and moral resilience of Colombian military personnel in complex operational contexts.

The Colombian military also enjoys a hard-earned reputation globally for entrepreneurialism and adaptability. As the most battle-hardened fighting force in Latin America and the Caribbean today, the country’s soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen eagerly embrace innovation to combat transnational security threats, making Colombia a proving ground for new technologies.

Historical Legacies and Turning Points

Six historical turning points prompted major institutional, doctrinal, and technological shifts that transformed military identity.

- 1932-1933 War with Peru (air support and logistics capabilities)

- 1951-1954 Participation in the Korean War (internationalization)
- 1958 The National Front and the Lleras Doctrine (internal security mandate and civil-military balance)
- 1999-2011 Plan Colombia and the Democratic Security Policy (force modernization and jointness)
- 2012-2017 Peace Process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (institutional transformation and restructuring)
- 2022-2026 Total Peace Strategy (strategic confusion and security setbacks)

Together, these episodes shaped the Colombian military forces as one of the better-trained and equipped forces in the Western Hemisphere, benefiting from sustained cooperation with the United States, prominent levels of joint planning and interoperability, and a strong commitment to the constitutional order. Against the backdrop of the internal armed conflict, the armed forces developed skills and capabilities to address domestic and transnational security challenges and continue to play a role in dismantling trafficking, drug crop cultivation, and illegal mining operations.

Civil-Military Relations and Oversight

Civil-military relations have enjoyed relative stability for decades, with the armed forces' complete subordination to civilian control and a long tradition of non-intervention in political affairs. Sustaining a professional rather than a partisan posture remains a source of legitimacy and credibility for the institution among the broader population. Following the 1991 Constitution, which introduced a civilian minister of defense and led to the expansion of the civilian bureaucracy at the ministry, the military acquiesced to closer oversight so long as civilian leaders, one, respected the military's autonomy over internal discipline and operational matters and, two, actively advocated for institutional interests across the cabinet and in the legislature.

Institutional Pressures and Internal Fault Lines

Key stressors include:

- Interservice rivalries, including with the National Police
- Human rights accountability and judicial protections for service members
- Retirement of senior, battle-hardened strategists from military service
- Attempted politicization of intelligence capability
- Balancing security strategies to address transnational organized crime with peace policies to entice non-state armed groups into demobilization.

The integration of the Colombian National Police as a co-equal service subordinate to the Minister of Defense—albeit with a distinctively civilian legal identity—has enabled closer coordination between defense and security forces in combating internal security threats. However, interservice rivalries occasionally inhibit trust, constraining joint operations on the battlefield and prompting bureaucratic infighting in budget and acquisition discussions. Concerns over human rights abuses and extrajudicial murders, especially the so-called false positives scandal during the Álvaro Uribe administration (2002-2010), have invited greater press scrutiny of military affairs, and today military leaders recognize public opinion as a major constraint or facilitator of their strategic ambitions.

Perhaps the most significant recalibration in civil-military relations occurred with the election of Colombia's first leftist president, Gustavo Petro, who sparred with the then-army commander on social media during the campaign season and within weeks of assuming the presidency demanded the resignation of more than 70 general and flag officers from service, retiring the Ministry of Defense's most seasoned strategic decision-makers. Petro later violated the spirit of civilian control by appointing a retired air force major general as his minister of defense, a curious move for a politician who historically sought to exert more independent accountability over the security forces.

Today's most senior military officers have struggled to balance the need for countering the country's violent transnational organized crime groups with Petro's Total Peace strategy, which seeks to entice these same actors into disarmament and demobilization discussions. Routine de-escalation and ceasefires with these groups degrade tactical intelligence collection and often enable criminals to consolidate territorial control. Further, Petro's failed attempts to civilianize the country's military intelligence capability under the National Intelligence Directorate have resulted in major cuts and personnel reassignments, eroding the military's morale and capacity while jeopardizing information-sharing arrangements with the United States.

II. Security Environment and Strategic Pressures

Transnational / Nontraditional Threats

- The sustained increase in coca cultivation and cocaine exports in recent years has reinforced the strategic importance of interdiction operations and intelligence-driven security cooperation with the United States and regional partners.
- Diplomatic tensions between the administrations of Presidents Donald Trump and Gustavo Petro have contributed to uncertainty regarding future bilateral security cooperation, especially in areas related to counternarcotics policy, democratic governance, and security assistance frameworks. The Trump administration's focus on kinetic and lethal action to deal with traffickers violates Colombia's preferred practice of interdiction and prosecution. In 2025, the U.S. government decertified Colombia as a reliable counternarcotics partner due to soaring coca cultivation, affecting Colombia's eligibility for robust military and police aid.
- Illegal armed groups in Colombia are increasingly transnational and innovating across digital, tactical, and economic lines to optimize recruitment; seize an operational advantage against state security forces, especially with drones; and fill their coffers

with proceeds from diversified activities including mining and human trafficking.

Extra-Hemisphere Influence / Arms Diplomacy

- Colombia's designation as a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Global Partner has strengthened interoperability standards and reinforced its international profile as a regional security exporter. The country maintains strong operational and training ties with NATO and has significantly expanded cooperation with Spain, the United Kingdom, and other South American Pacific Rim militaries, particularly in intelligence, cyber defense, aviation, and special operations capabilities.
- The Colombian military long enjoyed close relations with Israel, particularly its defense manufacturers, but recently transitioned to other hardware suppliers as President Petro severed diplomatic ties with Israel in 2024 over the Gaza conflict.
- Unlike other regional actors, Colombia has maintained limited strategic dependence on China or Russia in the defense sector. Nonetheless, both countries continue to seek opportunities to expand political and technological influence in Latin America, particularly in telecommunications, cybersecurity infrastructure, and strategic investment sectors.

Defense Capabilities and Gaps

Strengths

- High levels of professionalism and operational experience
- Strong institutional cohesion and esprit de corps
- Advanced counterinsurgency, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and irregular warfare expertise
- Significant interoperability with the United States and NATO
- Robust special operations, intelligence, and air mobility capabilities
- Growing, albeit limited, national military industrial capacity, especially in riverine and maritime capabilities

Gaps

- Aging equipment and sustainment challenges
- Limited air defense and anti-drone capabilities and insufficient resources for naval and aerospace modernization
- Persistent interservice rivalries
- Need for greater cyber and space-related capabilities
- Difficulties adapting joint operations doctrine to fragmented criminal threats
- Logistical and maintenance burdens associated with a prolonged high operational tempo

Regional and Strategic Implications

- For the United States, Colombia remains the most capable and strategically aligned military partner in South America. Bilateral cooperation has produced decades of interoperability, intelligence-sharing, training integration, and operational trust unmatched elsewhere in the region. However, Colombia's absence from certain recent hemispheric security initiatives, including the "Shield of the Americas" framework, has raised concerns regarding the future of defense cooperation.
- Colombia's strategic importance to the United States remains substantial regardless of recent diplomatic challenges due to several factors. It continues to be the world's largest producer of coca leaf and cocaine, while facing the convergence of multiple transnational threats. Further, the country shares the region's largest and most geopolitically sensitive border with Venezuela and enjoys Caribbean and Pacific coastlines at the maritime and land approaches to the Panama Canal.

III. Key Findings and Strategic Inference

Finding 1: Colombia possesses the most interoperable military force in Latin America and a long history of military-to-military ties with the United States, rendering its armed forces uniquely positioned to support regional security

cooperation across all domains.

Finding 2: The Colombian military must retool for a new era. It faces a volatile mix of tech-savvy criminal threats, political polarization, shifting public expectations, and perennially tight budgets.

Finding 3: Institutional legitimacy increasingly depends on the armed forces' ability to adapt to new operational pressures while enhancing accountability to civilian authorities and the broader population.

IV. Recommendations: Opportunities for Engagement

The following policy recommendations are intended for U.S. Southern Command and the broader U.S. interagency, in partnership with regional governments. These recommendations are tailored to Colombia and address cross-cutting needs. The emphasis is on proactive measures:

- **Recommendation 1:** Prioritize long-term defense modernization and technological innovation. Strengthening Colombia's domestic defense industry—including institutions such as INDUMIL and COTECMAR—would improve regional defense sustainability while providing reliable and affordable alternatives for hemispheric partners in the face of growing inducements or enticements from U.S. competitors such as China. Emphasis should be placed on cyber defense capabilities and maritime technology development, especially given Colombia's strategic position between two oceans and the growing importance of naval interdiction and regional maritime security.
- **Recommendation 2:** Support institutional sustainability through professional military education and personnel management reforms. Long-term military effectiveness relies as much on institutional health as it does on battlefield capability. Bilateral security cooperation should prioritize civil-military education, talent management, leadership development, and strategic planning capability.
- **Recommendation 3:** Expand cooperation on transnational and multidimensional security threats. Colombia's operational experience positions it as a regional security exporter capable of training and assisting partner nations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Supporting Colombia's role as a provider of

regional security cooperation would strengthen hemispheric resilience while reinforcing strategic alignment with the United States no matter the diplomatic, ideological, or partisan pressures affecting either side of the bilateral relationship. Treating security cooperation as an “all-or-nothing” ideological club could leave a crippling informational and operational blind spot at the very origin point of the world’s cocaine supply.

Colombia’s military culture reflects the evolution of a force shaped primarily by decades of internal armed conflict, close cooperation with the United States, and a strong institutional commitment to the constitutional order and civilian authority. Unlike many regional counterparts, the Colombian Armed Forces developed a professional, non-partisan identity grounded in operational effectiveness, adaptability, and increasing adherence to democratic oversight and human rights norms. Today, however, the institution faces a critical transition as it adapts from a counterinsurgency-focused force to one capable of addressing multidimensional security threats, including transnational organized crime, border instability, cyber vulnerabilities, and strategic competition in the Western Hemisphere. Despite fiscal pressures, modernization challenges, and evolving political dynamics in Bogotá and Washington alike, Colombia possesses the U.S. Department of War’s most interoperable and strategically aligned military partner in Latin America. This historic, strategic, and technological bond with the United States defines the very DNA of Colombia’s defense apparatus—a reality that Washington would do well to cultivate rather than overlook.

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