

From Peril to Partnership: A Q&A with Author Paul Angelo

Description

United States security assistance is a critical foreign policy tool—irregular warfare in action at the intersection of diplomacy and defense. Paul J. Angelo’s recent work, [*From Peril to Partnership: US Security Assistance and the Bid to Stabilize Colombia and Mexico*](#), provides a valuable look at US security assistance during Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative. Through complex case study analysis and sustained fieldwork, Paul emphasizes the importance of individualized approaches to delivering security assistance and undertaking security sector reform. I had the opportunity to sit down with Paul and discuss his book and applicable lessons that policymakers and practitioners may glean from his work and apply to future endeavors.

Ryan: In the book, you discuss the role of business elites as consequential determinants of success of any given security sector reform and underscore the importance of individualized approaches to security sector reform. With that in mind, how do you suggest policymakers and practitioners account for these variables prior to undertaking security sector reform with a partner nation?

Paul: Citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean view insecurity as one of their top concerns, and of course, rampant violence and crime adversely affect the region’s investment climate and the bottom line for business leaders. Given this confluence of interests, security is one area in which governments and national business communities should be able to work together. However, across the Americas, the private sector tends to look with suspicion on government policies, especially efforts to raise additional state revenue, instead of creating common cause with the political class to invest in a public good like security.

In countries where political and financial elites have historically operated in isolation, as is the case in Mexico, external actors such as the United States or multilateral lending organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank can be a good-faith guarantors, facilitating dialogue and helping foster the conditions for greater trust between government and the business community.

Examples from Mexican cities such as Ciudad Juarez and Monterrey illustrate the benefits of private-public partnerships in enhancing the provision of public security and underscore the importance of mechanisms that allow the private sector to exert oversight in the administration of government

security strategies. To address multidimensional security threats, we must move beyond whole-of-government approaches and begin to embrace whole-of-society ones. For this, the private sector is an essential interlocutor.

Ryan: How does political polarization within party systems affect the sustainability and continuity of security strategies, as discussed in the book?

Paul: Political polarization within party systems â?? both in donor governments and in governments on the receiving end of security assistance â?? can hinder the sustainability of security strategies. Plan Colombia benefited from robust bipartisan support in the United States Congress, ensuring its continuity and long-term effectiveness. Similarly, in Colombia, security was a shared political concern for politicians from across the political spectrum, and Colombiaâ??s legislature rallied around the transformation of Colombiaâ??s military and police during successive presidential administrations.

Conversely, the Merida Initiative in Mexico faced challenges due to its secretive negotiation process between Washington and the CalderÃ³n administration. Political opposition in Mexico took advantage of a longstanding suspicion of the United States and a lack of cross-party political support for the Merida Initiative at its inception to contest elements of the security assistance package and eventually completely dismantle them when the presidency changed hands in 2012 and 2018. This scenario underscores the importance of bipartisan support in the United States and a transparent legislative process for sustaining and adequately resourcing the main elements of a security strategy in recipient countries to foster sustainable and favorable outcomes.

Ryan: How does the degree of centralization of security bureaucracy influence security sector reform efforts, and what are the implications for external supporters like the United States?

Paul: One of the bigger challenges with these undertakings is that the United States canâ??t pick and choose the institutional design of our partner security institutions. In Colombia, centralized decision-making facilitated the implementation of reforms, allowing for effective coordination and distribution of resources. Further, the various institutions in the United States were clearly able to identify their counterparts in Colombia, thus making our efforts at coordination across both bureaucracies much more efficient.

However, in Mexico, the decentralized structure with well over 1,800 police forces in the country posed challenges for the United States to cultivate relationships with relevant institutions in ways that improved security outcomes, especially among state and municipal police forces. President Lopez Obradorâ??s establishment of the National Guard aimed to address institutional fragmentation but has also raised legitimate concerns about permanent militarization.

Ultimately, to manage risk in more decentralized security environments, the United States should identify specific institutions or agencies within larger institutions for partnership that can have an outsized impact on security outcomes. Financial intelligence units, specialized investigative teams for violent crimes, and counterterrorism agencies all benefited from considerable US training in Colombia and Mexico and helped improve public perceptions of security when they were deployed appropriately. But again, the effectiveness of this approach depends on a deeper understanding of the specific security challenges and the institutional landscape of each partner nation. What works in one country will not necessarily work in the next.

Ryan: You explore the role of public opinion as it relates to effectiveness and accountability of security sectors in internal conflict vis-à-vis the nature of the threat faced by Colombia and Mexico. How do you characterize the differences in public opinion and the role of civil society as it relates to the government's responses to the threat?

Paul: We must consider that Colombia and Mexico operate on vastly different scales, with Mexico being a much larger, more populous country, possessing considerably more economic prowess, and having a unique relationship with the United States due to its extensive border and a history of cross-border tensions. Notably, in Colombia, the nature of the security threat fostered a national sense of urgency. I think that points to another distinction that I make throughout the book: that the nature of the threat in Colombia fueled paranoia and a sense of concern amongst people from all walks of life and wherever they were in the country that Bogota was being brought to its knees and at risk of succumbing to revolution. The fact that the FARC and ELN had politico-military objectives, not solely criminal ones, fueled a national perception of the need to pivot in a different direction, namely one that facilitated the strengthening of Colombia's security forces.

Conversely, in Mexico, politicians tended to downplay the law enforcement concerns around organized crime as a manageable issue, something for the government to solve. Throughout the Merida Initiative, there were powerful political actors in Mexico who believed that a confrontational approach toward organized crime was the problem and instead quietly favored accommodation and negotiation with the cartels. Moreover, Mexico is a highly regionalist country, and the nation's security challenges as a national problem did not necessarily resonate in cities and states where criminal violence was not a major concern.

Ryan: Throughout the book, you discuss the emphasis placed on democracy promotion as a component of Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative and how this position contrasted with US security assistance packages in combat theaters in other parts of the world. What impact did the relative level of democratic consolidation in Mexico have for addressing its security situation, and how will it influence the contours of security in the future?

Paul: In Mexico, the transition to democracy, which occurred throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, was accompanied by a simultaneous decentralization of political power. As the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*'s grip on power collapsed, so too did the state's monopoly of force, which was largely dependent on the hegemonic party, and state security institutions were slow to adjust to this new political reality. Democratization also took place as the criminal underworld was undergoing major shifts. Suddenly, there were more cartels and criminal groups who had ever more nodes of entry to corrupt the state, especially at the municipal and state levels. As democracy took hold, political competition intensified at all levels of government, prompting security institutions to succumb to electoral and sometimes even criminal pressures.

Subsequently, armed violence from cartels surged, prompting President Calderón to centralize the armed power of the state early in his tenure and initiate a war against drug cartels, first by deploying the military to address matters of public order and then by raising a new Federal Police force. However, successive presidential administrations have failed to capitalize on the promise of a federal civilian police force, leading to the military's use in missions well beyond its democratic remit. All the while, criminal violence in Mexico is higher than at any point in the country's recent history, and increasingly, Mexico's democracy features political violence against candidates for office and activists, with more than 1,000 such incidents reported during the Lopez Obrador presidency.

Ryan: I want to flip the lens a bit, because your research dives deep into Colombian and Mexican security sectors and bureaucracy. But you did touch on the US's red tape impacting implementation at some points. Is the US security apparatus designed to deliver the support needed for security sector assistance in the twenty-first century? What did your research into these two case studies reveal about the strengths and weaknesses of the US system?

Paul: US security assistance would benefit from some reconceptualization, especially in terms of how quickly we can surge resources to partners in need. Likewise, the US security assistance architecture at present does not facilitate multi-year programming, which was a major factor that underpinned success in Colombia. But more than anything, Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative taught us the importance of the interagency coordination process in the administration of US security assistance.

In Colombia, institutions on both sides of the bilateral relationship understood the strategic objectives of Plan Colombia, and partnership at the diplomatic level trickled down to the working level. As the US government sorted out its own interagency decision-making and resource allocation process, our Colombian partners replicated that same effort, especially with the advent of the Integrated Action program — an attempt to bring the institutions of the Colombian state to long abandoned regions. And so there was a real synergy that came out of a whole-of-government commitment in Washington and Bogota.

It is hard to identify that same synergy in the Merida Initiative. This is in part because there are more interests at play in the US-Mexico relationship than there were in the US-Colombia relationship by virtue of our long, shared border with Mexico. Moreover, Mexico is a federal system, and the United States was not dealing with a unitary actor. On both sides of the US-Mexico relationship—whether it was subnational police forces, Customs and Border Protection, the Drug Enforcement Administration, you name it—there are whole agencies that must be brought into the conversation and whose voices and interests must be weighed in developing strategies. This feature of the relationship made it exceedingly difficult to enforce a unified strategic vision, especially in the absence of a clearly defined adversary and military objective, as was the case with Colombia’s insurgent and paramilitary groups.

Something that stands out to me in recent years is that the US Department of Defense has contributed more attention, and by extension, resources, to developing a cadre of people who are specialists in the administration of security assistance than other executive agencies and departments. This is apparent in recent efforts of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency to expand and enhance our security cooperation workforce. The forward presence of these individuals and teams at our embassies is a multiplier for the administration of US security assistance, was critical to the success of Plan Colombia, and will be essential to future efforts to coordinate shared security strategies for countering crime in Mexico.

Ryan: Given that this is the Irregular Warfare Initiative, what are your thoughts on the growing role of global competitors and how that may affect delivering US security assistance? In terms of the case studies in your book, the United States had the advantage of being the partner of choice in defense relationships during those periods, but that may not necessarily be true in the future.

Paul: Strategic competition was never really a foundational part of the calculus for why we engaged in Plan Colombia or the Merida Initiative. For the last 30 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, strategic competition with near-peer competitors has not been a significant driver of US engagement in the region. If you look at the arc of US-Latin American relations, this period was a remarkable exception to a long history of strategic denial. For decades after the Cold War, Russia had turned its back on even its closest allies in the Western Hemisphere, such as Cuba, and despite Beijing’s growing economic and diplomatic interest in the Americas, China developed more prominent security interests in other regions of the world.

US security assistance today, however, is occurring against a backdrop of competition with the United States’ near-peer competitors, as spelled out in the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy. Today, as the United States partners with Latin American and Caribbean nations to

curb common threats to insecurity, conversations with partners seldom happen without a very clear mention of US concerns over the growing influence of our adversaries, Russia and China, in the Western Hemisphere. And this brand of competition is the one area where we mostly see bipartisan agreement on Capitol Hill, making the temptation to use strategic competition as a justification for our regional engagement all the greater.

A prime example of this occurred recently in Ecuador. Although the United States is not exactly organizing around a Plan Ecuador as I advocated for in my [War On The Rocks piece](#), the strategic competition chatter in the background influences the contours of the US-Ecuador relationship. We needn't look much further than the decision by President Daniel Noboa to renege on the country's commitment to [send retired Soviet-era weapons](#) to the United States for the purpose of triangulation of spare parts to Ukraine because of the economic coercion that Russia was exerting over banana exports from Guayaquil.

Ryan: Let's talk about global application: have you experimented with applying your research to other parts of the world, just as a thought experiment or bouncing ideas from colleagues, and what the implications may be for Africa, Eastern Europe, or even the South Pacific?

Paul: The one thing that I would say about the region of the world in which I work, Latin America and the Caribbean, is that it stands out for the strength of its democratic tradition. In 2001, all the countries of the Americas (save Cuba) signed the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which subscribed governments and their peoples to a set of common values — ones that prized democratic deliberation and the rule of law as the basis of political decision-making. Furthermore, the Charter committed governments of this hemisphere to the multilateral defense of democracy in places where it was at risk of erosion or rapid backsliding.

I can't think of another region of the world apart from the European Union where that consensus has been so formalized, committing Washington to deliver a foreign policy toward its neighbors that supports democratic processes, prioritizes human rights, and advocates for the peaceful resolution of conflict. To this end, US security assistance, as it was in Colombia and Mexico, will continue to be implemented in ways that foster dialogue and mutual respect and hold democracy promotion as a core feature, even as illiberal and autocratic governments make inroads in the Americas.

I would encourage policymakers to prioritize the delivery of security assistance to those partners, wherever they are in the world, who demonstrate the political will necessary to foster long-term political stability, improved governance, and human rights. We will not always have the luxury of deciding where we intervene in the name of stability because our national interests are so diverse and so

complex. However, my book exposes both the promise and peril of US security assistance policy, and we met our objectives and then some when our interests and our values were aligned with those of our partners.

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Main Image: Dr. Paul Angelo addresses a foreign delegation at National Defense University on October 19th, 2023. ([William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies](#))

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