

Comparing the U.S.–Colombia Partnership to the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship¹

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This article characterises the US–Colombia Partnership (USCP) by comparing it to the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship (USUKSR). For this purpose, both dyads are graded within Lake’s typology of international hierarchies. Then Xu’s three minimum criteria for SRs – and a fourth criterion derived from Harnisch – are applied to the USCP, with references to the USUKSR. In the security dimension, the USCP could be graded as a weak (soft) protectorate under Plan Colombia, and it might be still today. The USUKSR is seen heading toward a weak protectorate due to Britain’s even closer post-Brexit alignment to the U.S. (by launching an Indo-Pacific tilt, clinching the AUKUS pact, and helping to broker a broader anti-China coalition, while remaining the staunchest NATO ally). In the economic dimension, the USUKSR until recently could be rated as market exchange, but now it has been approaching an economic zone (as Britain is courting America for more trade and investment, while shedding Huawei, shelving a bilateral FTA with China, and seeking CPTPP accession). The USCP classifies as an economic zone, since the U.S. is still Colombia’s largest export market and preferred investor, and Colombia has been very cautious with China (refraining from an FTA, and from joining the BRI). The USCP (by combining a weak protectorate with an economic zone) is rated as an informal empire, while the USUKSR may be close to it. The USCP is unlikely to become an SR, because U.S. substituted Colombian governance functions are focused on domestic security, and the U.S. public does not judge Colombia positively, and is far from regarding it as an ally. The paper ends with a note on the dominant partner.

Keywords: international hierarchy, special relationship, weak protectorate, economic zone, informal empire, substitution of partner’s governance functions

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Introduction

This article characterises the U.S.–Colombia Partnership (USCP) by comparing it to the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship (USUKSR). First, Lake's³ typology of international hierarchies is outlined, and both dyads are placed into its framework. Then Xu's⁴ three basic criteria for SRs – and a fourth criterion derived from Harnisch⁵ – are applied to the USCP, with references to the USUKSR. Conclusions include: differentiating between U.S. substituted British and Colombian governance functions; grading the two dyads with Lake's categories; explaining why the USCP is unlikely to become an SR; and commenting on the dominant partner's current shape.

Lake's typology

Lake conceives the international system as a set of dyadic relationships ranging from pure anarchy⁶ to pure hierarchy,⁷ with various forms in between, and dissects America's rapports of diverse hierarchy throughout the world.⁸ Since SRs are dyadic and hierarchical, Lake's U.S. focused typology offers a logical basis for a USCP–USUKSR comparison.⁹

Lake places anarchy in the origin, from where it traces two axes of increasing hierarchy. The horizontal axis marks the security dimension: diplomacy (anarchic origin), sphere of influence, weak (soft) protectorate and protectorate (hierarchical end). The vertical axis marks the economic dimension: market exchange (anarchic origin), economic zone, weak dependency, dependency (hierarchical end).¹⁰

From these relationships between anarchy and hierarchy, this paper selects four to grade the USCP and the USUKSR.

Security dimension:

- sphere of influence (where the dominant state – A – possesses the authority only to limit a subordinate's – B's – cooperation with third parties)
- weak protectorate (where A exercises substantial, though limited, control over B's foreign and defence policies)

³ David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁴ Ruike Xu, *Alliance Persistence within the Anglo–American Special Relationship. The Post-Cold War Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁵ Sebastian Harnisch, 'Special Relationships in Foreign Policy'. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017).

⁶ As in some great power relations (U.S.–URSS/Russia, U.S.–China).

⁷ As in the classic overseas empires.

⁸ David Lake, 'International Legitimacy Lost? Rule and Resistance when America is First', *Perspectives on Politics* 16 no 1 (2018), 6–21.

⁹ Haugevik suggests Lake's typology as a starting point to apply SRs as an analytical category. Kristin Haugevik, *Special Relationships in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), 27.

¹⁰ Lake, *Hierarchy*, 52.

Economic dimension:

- market exchange (where parties choose to trade, invest or otherwise engage in economic interactions while retaining full authority over their actions)
- economic zone (where B is restricted from giving market privileges to third parties or entering into economic transactions that give others influence over its affairs)¹¹

Security dimension – Hosting U.S. military personnel, sharing alliances

Lake captures security hierarchy with the presence of A's military personnel in B's territory, and with the number of B's independent alliances (without A).¹² Both the U.K. and Colombia permanently host U.S. service members in their territory, and currently both share all their key alliances with the U.S., accepting its hierarchy as legitimate.

The presence of American air bases in the U.K. was institutionalised by a number of U.S.–U.K. agreements/arrangements signed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although some of these bases were closed after the Cold War, there are still five in England, and they still matter in U.S. global strategic planning.¹³ Each sits on property leased from the British Ministry of Defence, each has Royal Air Force status, and together they employ nearly 10,000 U.S. service personnel.¹⁴ During the Cold War, the U.K. hosted U.S. strategic bombers and nuclear submarines.¹⁵ Overseas, the closed island Diego Garcia – part of the British Indian Ocean Territory defying international law, and leased to the U.S. until 2036 – has remained a U.S. naval and air base, key to Middle East operations.

More modestly, Colombia has housed a few hundred U.S. service members at bases without formal leases, relying on tacit understandings and broad interpretations of other agreements.¹⁶ Although a second best solution, these “quasibases” have allowed the U.S. to conduct drug interdiction, surveillance and other operations relevant to its strategic objectives in the region.¹⁷ The limits on U.S. personnel in Colombia were set within Plan Colombia, rising to 800 soldiers and 600 contractors in 2004,¹⁸ and remaining so for

¹¹ Ibid. 53–56.

¹² Ibid. 68–69.

¹³ Xu, *Alliance Persistence*, 138–139.

¹⁴ Trudy Brunot, ‘US Military Bases in the United Kingdom’, Classroom, 29 September 2017.

¹⁵ From 1948, Britain provided essential bases for U.S. B-29s. In 1960, PM Macmillan agreed that the U.S. could establish a Polaris submarine base at Holy Loch on the Clyde. David Reynolds, ‘A ‘special relationship’? America, Britain and the international order since the Second World War’, *International Affairs* 62, no 1 (1985), 8, 12.

¹⁶ In 2009, the Uribe Government tried to formalise U.S. access to seven Colombian bases in a Defence cooperation agreement (ACD) signed under presidential authority to expand previous bilateral treaties. But the Constitutional Court declared the ACD void without congressional approval, since it created new obligations (such as granting immunity to U.S. personnel in Colombia and allowing for permanent U.S. presence). Uribe's successor, Santos let the ACD perish, and convinced the U.S. that a formal agreement was not indispensable. Tom Long et al., ‘Domestic Contestation and Presidential Prerogative in Colombian Foreign Policy’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 39 no 4 (2020), 472–473.

¹⁷ Sebastián Bitar, *La presencia militar de Estados Unidos en América Latina. Bases y cuasibases* (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2017), 8, 168.

¹⁸ Semana, ‘Militares gringos en Colombia: así han hecho presencia durante 20 años’, 29 January 2019, cites Bitar's figures.

subsequent years. Anyway, the real U.S. presence has been lower than the established. Plan Colombia (2000–2015) was a multibillion-dollar USCP effort to stabilise Colombia and fight the intertwined drug and guerrilla war.¹⁹

While in the European Union (EU),²⁰ the U.K. largely obstructed initiatives toward intra-EU defence cooperation-integration, except for a brief period between 1998 and 2003 (from the Saint-Malo declaration to the Iraq War) when it “paid lip service” to Europe having a “capacity for autonomous action [...] to respond to international crises.”²¹ Post-Brexit “Global Britain” (with its imperial reflexes resurfaced, and even more relied on the USUKSR after relinquishing the EU path to influence)²² continued positioning itself as “the leading European ally in NATO”,²³ while also launched a complex “tilt to the Indo-Pacific”,²⁴ where it sent its new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth. Then came the AUKUS defence pact to supply Australia with eight nuclear-propelled submarines with U.S. and British technology. Furthermore, PM Johnson – as G7 chair in 2021 – hosted the “First Summit of the anti-China coalition”, extended to India, Australia, South Korea and South Africa.²⁵

Colombia – a loyal U.S. partner within the Inter-American System (the OAS²⁶ and the Rio Treaty²⁷) – restrained its participation in the South American Defence Council (a cooperative security project of UNASUR) even under the liberal Santos presidency, which saw the country accepted by NATO as its partner in Latin America. The ensuing (neoconservative) Duque Government quickly left UNASUR as a gesture to the U.S. and the OAS. It also championed close coordination with the Trump Administration (by the Lima Group and within the revived Rio Treaty framework) as it tried to lead efforts to change Venezuela’s Bolivarian regime, which is supported by Russia and China.

¹⁹ Although the U.S. Congress approved Plan Colombia as an enhanced antidrug effort, the neoconservative Bush–Uribe duo transformed it – within the global war on terror – into a massive joint operation against FARC guerrillas: to weaken their military capabilities, cut drug trafficking as their funding source, and undermine their social and political basis. Plan Colombia was never submitted to the Colombian Congress. FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia. Diana Marcela Rojas, ‘Estados Unidos en la construcción de la paz en Colombia’, *Análisis Político* 30, no 91 (2017), 38; Adam Isacson, ‘It’s Not Too Late for the Land of Mercenaries’, *The New York Times*, 05August 2021; Rodrigo Pardo, ‘Un acuerdo inocuo’. Preface in *Relaciones militares Colombia–Estados Unidos*, by Martha Lucía Ramírez and Jorge Robledo (Bogotá: Norma, 2011), XIII–XXII.

²⁰ Earlier European (Economic) Community (EC).

²¹ Frédéric Mauro, ‘European defence: Mourning England’, *Tribune, IRIS France*, 22 January 2020; *Joint Declaration on European Defence, issued at the British–French Summit Saint-Malo*, 1998.

²² Vladislav Zubok, ‘Comments in Международное обозрение’ [International Review], Россия 24 TV [Russia 24 TV], anchor Fyodor Lukyanov, 02 July 2021.

²³ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (March 2021), 20.

²⁴ Ibid. 60, 66.

²⁵ Heribert Dieter, ‘Der erste Gipfel der Anti-China-Koalition’, *SWP-Aktuell* no 4 (2021), 1–2, 5.

²⁶ Organization of American States, 1948, collective security.

²⁷ Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, 1947, collective defence (and beyond).

Economic dimension – The China problem

Lake's indicators for economic hierarchy are: the junior partner's trade diversification/dependency (its trade with the U.S. compared to its trade with all the other permanent members of the UN Security Council combined) and its exchange rate system (floating, flexible or rigid dollar peg, dollarisation).²⁸

Within British foreign trade, the shares corresponding to the U.S. and to all the other permanent UNSC members (France, China, Russia) combined were almost equal and rather modest, at around 15 per cent in 2019.²⁹

Within Colombia's imports, the shares of the U.S. and of all the other permanent UNSC members were also similar, but higher (both close to 25 per cent). However, the U.S. absorbed twice as many Colombian exports as China, France, Britain and Russia combined (25 per cent versus 12 per cent).³⁰

Both the U.K. and Colombia have their currencies floating. London has remained a global financial hub. The U.K. and the U.S. are each other's largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI). The U.S. is the largest single investor in Colombia.³¹

Trade trends

Lake found a pattern of particular openness to trade within dyads between U.S. subordinates.³² In addition to the U.S. itself, Colombia has been implementing FTAs with (other) U.S. allies/partners, such as the EU, Canada, Korea or those of the Pacific Alliance.

In contrast, Colombia has shown strong wariness of China: although attracted by the Chinese market and financing opportunities, it refrained from negotiating a bilateral FTA,³³ or from joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). President Duque – after securing avocado and banana export quotas on a visit to China in 2019,³⁴ recently has courted Washington for “nearshoring” (to Colombia U.S. production to be withdrawn from China).

²⁸ Lake, *Hierarchy*, 75, 73.

²⁹ Office for National Statistics, ‘UK Balance of Payments’, 31 October 2019, 9, 16.

³⁰ Departamento Nacional de Estadística, ‘Importaciones de Colombia según países de origen 1980–2019’; ‘Exportaciones de Colombia según países de destino 1970–2019’, *Series históricas*, 2019.

³¹ While the U.S. is the largest origin country, the largest contributors to FDI in Colombia are Panama and Caribbean tax havens. From Colombia's total inward FDI between 1994 and 2020, 20.3 per cent came from the U.S., 12.2 per cent from Panama, 11.3 per cent from Spain, 10.7 per cent from England, and a sizable share from British Overseas Territories (4.2 per cent only from Bermuda). Colombia Reports, ‘Foreign investment in Colombia’, 08 March 2021.

³² Lake, *Hierarchy*, 99.

³³ President Santos favoured an FTA with China, but its political costs were deemed as too high, as it faced fierce opposition from domestic industries, and likely U.S. disapproval (still milder under President Obama than his successors in the White House). Thus, Santos (whose priority was the peace agreement with the FARC guerrilla) reverted to ratification of a Sino–Colombian investment treaty.

³⁴ Duque did not relaunch the FTA idea, despite his China visit. Eduardo Velosa, ‘China: Atrapada en la Política Exterior de Colombia’, *Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Santiago de Chile*, 03 August 2020.

Anyway, China became Colombia's second trading partner, and Chinese consortia won two big pre-Covid tenders in infrastructure,³⁵ a vital sector neglected by U.S. investors.

Disengaging from the EU, the U.K. signed only a thin trade agreement with its nearest and biggest market (46 per cent of British exports) in late 2020, while it quickly concluded over sixty "continuity" trade agreements with non-EU partners (11 per cent of exports in 2019).³⁶ The U.K. hailed the U.S. as its "biggest single bilateral trading partner", accounting for almost 20 per cent of exports in 2019.³⁷ But FTA negotiations conducted under Trump were paused since the Biden Administration lost fast track authority. Britain signed its first brand new FTA with Australia in late 2021.

The U.K. made a volte-face in its China policy in 2019. Back in 2015, Britain joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank despite U.S. criticism. Boris Johnson even as PM repeatedly called for a Sino–British FTA. But after the Hong Kong demonstrations and the adoption of a tough security law in mid-2020 (breaching the autonomy accorded to the former British colony in the Sino–British Treaty of 1984), London not only protested, but offered all Hong Kong residents with British National (Overseas) Passports to settle in Britain.³⁸ Then it decided to exclude Chinese TC giant Huawei from its 5G networks (under pressure from the U.S.–U.K. defence establishment).³⁹

Domestic pressures seemed to block a British FTA with China for some time.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the U.K. applied for accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. CPTPP accession would make a real difference to the EU, adding a trade policy component to the Indo-Pacific tilt framework.⁴¹ Anyway, China turned into Britain's top import source in goods by Q3 2021, ahead of Germany and the U.S.

Symbolic obeisance

Another behavioural pattern revealed by Lake among U.S. subordinates has been to perform acts of symbolic obeisance,⁴² such as following the ruler into war. The U.K. sent troops to Korea, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq to fight in U.S. led coalitions (providing the second largest contingents).

³⁵ Namely to build the Bogota metro and a commuter train linking the Colombian capital to several nearby municipalities.

³⁶ These (short term) deals have largely replicated what the U.K. had as an EU member state, and their impact is paltry compared to the negative impact of new barriers to trade with its largest partner. Anand Menon, 'What does Global Britain mean in practice?', *Conservative Home*, 03 March 2021.

³⁷ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 60.

³⁸ Dieter, 'Der erste Gipfel', 2.

³⁹ David Green, 'The UK's Incoherent China Strategy', *World Politics Review*, 29 January 2021.

⁴⁰ Menon, 'What does Global Britain mean?'.

⁴¹ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 67; Claudia Major and Nicolai von Ondarza, 'Die EU und Global Britain: So nah, so fern', *SWP-Aktuell* no 35 (2021), 2–3.

⁴² These acts are costly, and do not involve direct fulfilment of (the dominant state's) mandates. They rather constitute public, and often collective displays of submission, recognising and affirming the authority of the ruler. Lake, *Hierarchy*, 165.

Battalion Colombia's sacrifices in the Korean War (where it fought as part of a U.S. regiment) constituted a remarkable act of symbolic obeisance, crediting Colombia as the privileged U.S. partner in Latin America for many years.⁴³ Yet after the Cuban Revolution, the U.S. redirected military cooperation in the region to domestic security.⁴⁴

Criteria for special relationships

Xu's three minimum criteria

Xu specifies three minimum criteria for an SR:⁴⁵ 1. Long-term security cooperation. 2. Exclusive cooperation in certain areas of security.⁴⁶ 3. Constant positive judgment between the two partners, regarding each other as a very reliable and trustworthy ally.

Long-term security cooperation

Although the USUKSR stands out by its highly institutionalised military cooperation, the USCP has also reached solid institutionalisation in this field. According to a report sponsored by the U.S. Southern Command, U.S.–Colombian military cooperation is one of the closest in the hemisphere, if not the closest. The complex multilevel interaction between the two military hierarchies will persist, based on institutional relationships, personal ties and shared visions of strategies and roles.⁴⁷ Path dependency, praised by Xu as a key factor of persistence in the USUKSR, also applies to the USCP in this regard.⁴⁸

Exclusive cooperation in certain areas of security

Although less impressive than the U.S.–U.K. nuclear or intelligence cooperation, U.S.–Colombian collaboration in confronting transnational crime related to drug trafficking can also be seen as exclusive. Colombia became a security provider since its military had gained expertise under Plan Colombia in fighting domestic guerrillas with U.S. techniques.⁴⁹ The triangular schemes to export such Colombian expertise to Central

⁴³ President Uribe's public support for the Iraq War can be seen as symbolic obeisance "light", since it did not mean sending Colombian troops overseas (but inviting U.S. service members instead).

⁴⁴ Washington requested Latin American governments and their armed forces to protect their own territories from Soviet influenced internal enemies. Saúl Rodríguez, *La Influencia de los Estados Unidos en el Ejército Colombiano, 1951–1959* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2006), 108.

⁴⁵ Xu, *Alliance Persistence*, 5–6.

⁴⁶ This is one among a series of special qualities that make an SR endure, if both states possess them. Other alternatives can be: similar language, shared culture, common values or close ethnic bonds. Ibid. 5.

⁴⁷ Global Americans, *The Future of U.S.–Colombian Relations* (Florida International University, 04 July 2019).

⁴⁸ Xu, *Alliance Persistence*.

⁴⁹ Natalia Arbeláez, 'Con Duque hay un retorno a posiciones de mayor sumisión que con Trump son muy arriesgadas'. Interview with Arlene Tickner. *La Silla Vacía*, 26 April 2019.

America with U.S. co-financing and supervision received the blessing of President Obama at the Cartagena Summit of the Americas.⁵⁰

Mutual positive judgment and trust as allies

The third criterion – mutual positive judgment and trust as reliable allies – implies a dose of collective identity.⁵¹ The American public, however, is mostly lacking these positive feelings towards Colombia.

Recent U.S. administrations referred to Colombia as one of their closest partners or even allies in the hemisphere and even beyond, although President Biden was more restrained, acknowledging only the “enduring partnership”.⁵² The USCP was obviously affected by Colombian neoconservative lawmakers’ advisory role in Trump’s 2020 re-election campaign, which painted Biden as a “socialist”,⁵³ but it recovered soon.

Among U.S. officers praising their Colombian colleagues was General Kelly who even penned an op-ed backing a U.S.–Colombian SR when he led the Southern Command.⁵⁴ Pro-Americanism has been traditionally high among Colombian elites, perfectly coupled to their U.S. peers, and the U.S. is quite popular among ordinary Colombians as well.⁵⁵

The American public, however, does not judge Colombia favourably, nor does it perceive the country as a U.S. ally. Gallup polls, conducted in 2001, 2002 and 2003 found – for each favourable opinion about Colombia – two unfavourable ones.⁵⁶

Moreover, Americans placed Colombia in the no man’s land between “ally” and “enemy” in two polls, in 2014 and 2017. Among 144 countries ranked along the ally–enemy continuum, Colombia was 93rd in 2014 and 108th in 2017, while the U.K. was ally No. 1 and No. 2 in the same polls.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Eduardo Pastrana and Diego Vera, ‘Colombia y su agenda de seguridad. Del gobierno de Juan Manuel Santos al gobierno de Iván Duque’, in *La región frente a los cambios globales en materia de seguridad*, ed. by Sandra Namihas (Lima: Equis Equis, 2019), 49.

⁵¹ Although not necessarily comparable to the cherished Anglo–American “we-ness” – as conceived, for example, by Janice Bially Mattern, ‘The Power Politics of Identity’, *European Journal of International Relations* 7 no 3 (2001).

⁵² The White House, ‘Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Ivan Duque of Colombia’, *Statements and Releases*, 28 June 2021.

⁵³ El Tiempo, ‘Intervención de congresistas del CD en EEUU sí hizo daño’, 01 June 2021.

⁵⁴ John Kelly, ‘Colombia’s resolve merits support’, *Miami Herald*, 03 May 2015.

⁵⁵ Nearly seven-in-ten Colombians (69 per cent) with higher incomes say they favour the U.S., while 55 per cent with lower incomes agree. Kat Devlin, ‘Obama to meet Latin American leaders amid positive views of U.S. in the region’, *Pew Research Center*, 07 April 2015.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Jones, ‘Americans Rate Iran Most Negatively of 22 Countries. Canada, Great Britain viewed most favorably’, *Gallup*, 23 February 2006.

⁵⁷ Josh Katz and Kevin Quealy, ‘Which Country Is America’s Strongest Ally?’ *The New York Times*, 03 February 2017.

A fourth criterion: Substitution for partner's governance functions should be moderate

Harnisch identifies SRs as “based on regular entanglement of some (external) governance functions”, and as “a moderate form of international hierarchy, in which one of the partners is substituting for some governance functions of the other”.⁵⁸ Hence, in an SR, entangled governance functions should be external, and substitution should not be excessive.

Within the USUKSR, the U.S. substituted for important (external) governance functions of the U.K. in defence by complementing its capabilities, so that it could still play a global role. The British gave up their own ballistic missile production and equipped their nuclear submarines with U.S. made Polaris and then Trident missiles, for which they developed their nuclear warheads. Moreover, in the Five Eyes community they receive intelligence from the Americans, without which they would be “half-deaf and completely blind”.⁵⁹

Within the USCP, Plan Colombia – a deep “intervention by invitation”⁶⁰ – involved U.S. substitution for multiple Colombian (domestic) governance functions.⁶¹ This substitution decreased during the Santos presidency, when Plan Colombia was largely nationalised.⁶² But it increased again under the (conspicuously patron–client) Trump–Duque couple, mainly due to a renewed emphasis on counter-narcotics, particularly on forced coca eradication, with more U.S. advisers on the ground.⁶³ Encouragingly, the Biden Administration started a “holistic” approach (based on shared responsibility and alternative crops).⁶⁴

⁵⁸ As well as “a consensual form of limited hierarchical governance based on multiple functions”. Harnisch, ‘Special Relationships’, 1, 3.

⁵⁹ Mauro, ‘European defence’. Britain – which plans to replace its four Vanguard Class nuclear submarines with Dreadnought Class ones beginning in the early 2030s, as well as to develop a new nuclear warhead – pledges to continue working closely with the U.S. to ensure that the (British) warhead remains compatible with the (American) Trident Strategic Weapon System. HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 77–78.

⁶⁰ Arlene Tickner, ‘Intervención por invitación. Claves de la política exterior colombiana y de sus debilidades principales’, *Colombia Internacional* no 65, (2007), 90–111; Álvaro Méndez, *Colombian Agency and the Making of US Foreign Policy. Intervention by Invitation* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁶¹ The anti-guerrilla war was waged with sophisticated intelligence provided by the Americans. Moreover, many public officials from multiple Colombian institutions travelled each month to Washington to submit to debates and decisions crucial aspects of domestic politics. Tickner, ‘Intervención’, 107. The U.S. embassy in Bogota functioned as “an alternate seat of government” during Uribe’s second term, according to Wikileaks cables. Diana Marcela Rojas, ‘Las relaciones Colombia – Estados Unidos en el Gobierno Santos: ¿Llegó la hora del post conflicto?’ *Análisis Político* 26 no 79 (2013), 121–138.

⁶² Pastrana and Vera, ‘Colombia y su agenda’, 49. U.S. military, antidrug and intelligence assistance has dropped to a small percentage of Colombia’s overall defence budget (2.8 per cent in 2017). Global Americans, *The Future of U.S.–Colombian Relations*, 8–9. Triangular cooperation also meant Colombia substituting for some U.S. (external) security functions elsewhere.

⁶³ Infobae, ‘Gobierno colombiano defiende ayuda de EEUU contra el narco’, 08 June 2020.

⁶⁴ Noticias Caracol, ‘¿Por qué Joe Biden no había hablado con Iván Duque antes?: asesor de la Casa Blanca responde’. Interview with Juan González, 28 June 2021.

Conclusions and a final note

Similarities and differences

In the security dimension, both the U.K. and Colombia have demonstrated symbolic obeisance to America, both continue hosting its military personnel, and both share all their key alliances with it.⁶⁵

U.S. substituted British and Colombian governance functions differ on one major point: in the British case they centre on (external) defence, while in the Colombian case they concern primarily domestic security, being more intrusive. Nevertheless, both substitutions give the U.S. ample influence over its partner's foreign policy (FP).

Without U.S. approval, the U.K. cannot pledge its nuclear and intelligence capabilities to third parties, because they are inseparably tied into America's superior capabilities.⁶⁶ Moreover, post-Brexit British FP has become once again dominated by the USUKSR, as in the Cold War era (before EC accession), when its success was judged by how close could the U.K. nuzzle up to the U.S., harnessing its intelligence, military, industrial and technological power.⁶⁷

Colombia – due to America's "high economic, military, judicial, and political support in the hybrid war against drug trafficking, insurgency, and terrorism – has entrusted much of its domestic and foreign agendas to understandings with the White House, Congress, and U.S. security agencies."⁶⁸ In short, Colombia submitted to U.S. approval a substantial part of its state policy.

Grading

The USCP could clearly be graded as a weak protectorate under Plan Colombia, and that might still be the case. The USUKSR (well beyond a sphere of influence) now can be seen heading towards a weak protectorate, due to added U.S. hierarchy derived from even closer post-Brexit British alignment, despite all "Global Britain" euphoria.

In the economic dimension, the USUKSR until recently could be rated as market exchange, but now it is approaching an economic zone, with Britain joining the U.S. sponsored China-isolation drive, and looking to the U.S. (even to selected U.S. states) for more trade and investment.

⁶⁵ The U.K. as an ally certainly delivers more value to the U.S. than Colombia, and arguably more than any other state.

⁶⁶ This security embeddedness is recognised in the previous review of British strategy: "The unparalleled extent of UK–US cooperation on nuclear, intelligence, diplomacy, technology and military capabilities plays a major role in guaranteeing our national security. Our ability to operate together in future is at the heart of our planning." *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review. A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, 2015, Chapter 5. Project Our Global Influence, 51, § 5.31.

⁶⁷ Zubok, 'Comments'.

⁶⁸ Pastrana and Vera, 'Colombia y su agenda', 42.

The USCP classifies as an economic zone, since the U.S. is still Colombia's largest export market and preferred investor, and efforts to deepen trade relations with China have been “caught up” in Colombian FP.⁶⁹

In Lake, a dyad combining intermediate levels of both security and economic hierarchy (with B ceding substantial but not all authority to A in both arenas) yields an informal empire.⁷⁰

The USCP (combining a weak protectorate with an economic zone) is rated as an informal empire. The USUKSR (combining a near weak protectorate with a near economic zone) is on the verge of being classified as an informal empire.

Why the USCP is unlikely to become an SR

The two obstacles in the way of the USCP to be rated as an SR – that is, Colombia's rather negative image in the U.S. general public, and the domestic security focus of U.S. substituted Colombian governance functions – are not likely to disappear in the foreseeable future.

Unfavourable image

The 2017 U.S. poll (with the U.S. public taking even more distance from Colombia than before) might have been influenced by a shortly earlier plebiscite, where Colombians rejected the original peace agreement, despite its overwhelming international support.

Colombia's image abroad was further damaged by repercussions of the “false positives” scandal;⁷¹ the murder of hundreds of social leaders and ex guerrillas by militias fighting for the control of vacated FARC areas; the militarised repression of massive anti-government protests, sparked by inequities hopelessly exacerbated through Covid paralysees; and the involvement of retired Colombian soldiers in the assassination of Haitian President Moïse, dealing a severe blow to the narrative about Colombia's conversion from a quasi-failed state into a security provider.⁷²

⁶⁹ For clarity, Velosa adds: “Colombia's interaction with other international actors, including China, is subordinate to its special relationship with the US.” Velosa, ‘China: Atrapada’.

⁷⁰ Lake, *Hierarchy*, 58.

⁷¹ Colombian soldiers murdered over six thousand mostly poor, young civilians between 2002 and 2008, and registered them as guerrillas killed in combat to receive rewards. Al Jazeera, ‘Former Colombian leader asks pardon for army killings of civilians’, 21 June 2021.

⁷² U.S. trained Colombian veterans have been legally working as contractors in Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan, or illegally training drug cartels in Mexico. The Haitian incident revealed the difference between their meagre pensions and the high market value of their lethal skills. Joshua Collins and Parker Asmann, ‘The Colombian War Machine Has Gone Global’, *World Politics Review*, 19 July 2021.

Invited interventions

Colombian governments have traditionally invited U.S. intervention into their domestic sphere, and U.S. administrations have repeatedly intervened: from the 1846 Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty⁷³ to Plan Colombia;⁷⁴ and from U.S. backed civic-military counterinsurgency schemes in the 1960s⁷⁵ to U.S. help in chasing drug barons especially in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁷⁶ Thus, U.S. administrations and security forces became complicit in the development of a “paramilitary culture” in Colombian society, and they have become inextricably involved in its never ending armed conflicts.

A note on America as dominant partner

Britain’s and Colombia’s reliance to the U.S. has increased in a desperately uncertain world, but their dominant partner is not in good shape either.

The U.K. – after exiting its EU power base – was left with virtually no other option but to play the role of an agile, avant-garde U.S. junior partner.⁷⁷ The Colombian state – with a peace agreement half-heartedly implemented, militias of all stripes thriving on coca production, and overwhelming social conflicts – is anxious for U.S. support.

The U.S., however – seen as a semi-global empire in retreat for decades⁷⁸ – is now cutting back its ambition of worldwide democracy extension, and is switching to a pragmatic, openly egocentric policy. To this respect, Biden follows Trump’s line, despite vilifying him so much, notes a Russian political scientist.⁷⁹

⁷³ This treaty guaranteed the U.S. free transit across Panama, then a province of New Granada (Colombia after 1863). It also committed the U.S. to assure New Granada’s sovereignty over the isthmus as well as to maintain its neutrality. With a railroad built across the isthmus, the U.S. was responsible for protecting the route. So the U.S. found itself embroiled in Colombian political disputes, and intervened militarily in Panama seven times in the second half of the 19th century. Thus, the Colombian province became a U.S. protectorate (before secession in 1903). Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat. The Past, Present, and Future of the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 60–61.

⁷⁴ Colombia became the largest recipient of U.S. aid in the region and the showcase of a state rebuilding intervention. Colombian armed forces accessed U.S. technology, weaponry, intelligence information and on-the-ground advice, and a covert CIA action program (with NSA spying assistance and satellite-guided smart bombs) allowed them to kill more than twenty rebel leaders. Rojas, ‘Estados Unidos’, 38–39.

⁷⁵ Bradley Lynn Coleman, *Colombia and the United States. The Making of an Inter-American Alliance, 1939–1960* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2008), 199. After visiting Colombia in 1962, General Yarborough, commander of the Pentagon’s Special Warfare Center, proposed the creation of armed civilian units to “execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known Communist proponents”. Human Rights Watch, ‘Colombia’s Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States’, 01 November 1996, no 2033.

⁷⁶ Members of the Pentagon’s elite Joint Special Operations Command aided on the ground the Colombian Government’s search for drug lord Pablo Escobar, who was shot dead in Medellín in late 1993. Ryan Devereaux, ‘Colombian Mercenaries and the Assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse’, *The Intercept*, 26 July 2021.

⁷⁷ Zubok, ‘Comments’.

⁷⁸ Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat*.

⁷⁹ Fyodor Lukyanov, ‘Прощание с гегемонией’ [Farewell to Hegemony], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs], 20 August 2021.

The U.S. abandoned Afghanistan in disarray after 20 years of futile state-building efforts, which began with devastating bombings in the wake of 9/11. America's abrupt withdrawal, and the immediate collapse of its local client government sent a sign of caution to allies and partners alike.

U.S. claims to lead a global coalition of democracies (opposed to autocracies) sound hollow. Today's America cannot exercise authority⁸⁰ even nearly as legitimate as it could vis-à-vis Britain⁸¹ and other core countries in the post-WWII Western order. U.S. hierarchy over Colombia never really had broad-based legitimacy, despite attempts to widen this base from the Alliance for Progress to Peace Colombia.

The U.S. (now the most unequal among the industrialised countries) is an imperial system that can no longer ensure a rising standard of living even for many of its own citizens.⁸² America's striking economic polarisation, prolonged post-9/11 democratic regression, and advanced social disintegration have been aggravated by Covid-justified authoritarian (if not totalitarian) style controls.

The moral for Britain and Colombia is obviously not to put all their eggs into one single nest.

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⁸⁰ A kind of power, where subordinates follow the mandates of the ruler, because they find them legitimate. Lake, 'International Legitimacy Lost?', 8.

⁸¹ The U.K. was the largest single Marshall aid recipient.

⁸² Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat*, 276.

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