Colombian civilian and military actors’ perceptions of their relationship in the era following the 2016 peace accord

Manuela Nilsson

When countries transition from war to peace, military and civilian actors often struggle with the task of redefining their relationships with each other. In most cases it is not the relationship between the military and the political elites that needs to be redefined, but rather the military’s relationship with the civilian population. During protracted social conflicts, military actors often become conflict actors, and the confidence and trust between them and the civilian population deteriorate. (Re)-establishing relational peace between state security actors and civilians is therefore an important part of post-accord reconciliation and may ultimately prove to be more important for peace to be sustainable than repairing the relationship with the opposing conflict actor. When a peace negotiation process is followed by a period of continued violence caused by other armed actors not included in the initial agreement, which is often the case in today’s social conflicts, ever-closer cooperation between military and civilian actors is often deemed necessary. However, a dialogue between military actors and representatives of civilian communities and society, in which they discuss the present state and future vision of their relationship with each other, is almost never a part of peace processes and has found very little echo in the literature on civil–military relations.

The concept of civil–military relations refers to the interaction between the armed forces of a state, the state’s population, and its civilian political institutions. Just what form this relationship between a society and the security actors tasked to protect it should take has been the subject of a long debate. Until the 1990s, this debate mostly used consolidated democracies as case studies and focused predominantly on the intra-state power distribution between civilian and military actors, the strict social coding separating military and civilian areas of expertise and engagement, the ever-apparent fear of democracy being toppled by legally armed actors, and the resulting need to achieve civilian control over the military (Rosén 2009). A core aspect of this debate has been to find a way in which the allegedly distinct
worldviews, cultures, and functions – liberal civilian on the one hand, and conservative military on the other hand – can peacefully coexist without endangering democracy or compromising security. Theories range from strict separation and regulation to gradual convergence of the two spheres (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960; Finer 1988; Feaver 2005). Latin American countries have featured prominently in this debate, as the subcontinent has been characterized by cycles of alternations in civilian and military governments and has experienced several attempted and executed military coups even in recent years. Latin American militaries have played a decisive role in the shaping of the nation states after independence and frequently intervene in internal affairs, on the basis of a widespread understanding, among both the military and some civilian political elites, that their predominant task is to preserve internal, rather than external, order and guarantee their countries’ social and economic development (Kruijit and Koonings 2002; Mares and Martínez 2014; Skaar and Gianella Malca 2014; Pion-Berlin 2016; Bruneau and Goetze 2019; Pastrana Buelvas and Gehring 2019).

With the expansion during the 1990s of international peacebuilding activities in countries emerging from armed conflict, civil–military relations also became part of the discussion on peacebuilding. The international consensus strongly favors both the establishment of civilian authority over military actors and a rapid transfer of public order security tasks from the military back to the police as well as to local civilian authorities, particularly in societies that feature a security sector that has been greatly enlarged during a prolonged period of armed conflict. Included in the international demands for security sector reform is the reduction and vetting of the security apparatus and training in human rights as an integral part of all peacebuilding operations (United States Institute of Peace 2009; Hanlon and Shultz 2016). At the same time, the idea of enhancing cooperation between military and civilian actors added another dimension to the international debate around the civil–military relationship. Cooperation between international military units and civilian actors, particularly in theaters of operation and violent environments where the military engaged in development work to secure the “hearts and minds” of the civilian population, changed the coding of what is considered military activities and made the military’s identity increasingly “fuzzier” (NATO 2003; Rosén 2009: 598).

Except for these attempts by international military units to use development work to enlist the cooperation of civilian populations in host countries, however, it is rather striking that, overall, the debate on civil–military relations has focused predominantly on the relationship between the military and civilian political and economic elites (Rosén 2009; Houngnikpo 2016; Herspring and Volgyes 2018; Mares 2018). We know very little about the process of, and obstacles to, achieving relational peace between the military
and civilian actors below the elite level after peace agreements have been signed, even though this process constitutes a cornerstone of sustainable peace. This gap becomes particularly worrisome when we are dealing with environments where there are still high levels of violence and where cooperation between sectors of the population and the military might become essential to raising security levels, particularly in rural areas. Listening to the actors themselves in the formulation of the challenges their relationship faces is therefore an important first step to filling this gap and embarking on the path toward relational peace between civilians and the military in every society emerging from protracted violent conflict. The objective of this research is therefore to give those actor groups a voice, to provide them with an opportunity to compare their respective perceptions of the other and their relationship and how they envision its future in a period of transition from armed conflict to peace.

Colombia represents a prime example of a country struggling with continued violence in the post-accord period. Originally sparked by widespread dissatisfaction with unequal distribution of power, wealth, and land dating back to colonial times, the internal armed conflict in Colombia erupted into a prolonged period of violence in the 1960s. In later decades, it has been fueled by a rising production of, and traffic with, illegal drugs (National Center for Historic Memory 2013), which entangled a myriad of armed actors, including several guerrilla groups, paramilitary organizations, and state security actors as well as the Colombian government, in a web of violence and corruption (Angelo 2017). After several failed attempts at negotiation between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC), a peace agreement was finally ratified in the fall of 2016. However, violence persists. The disarmament and demobilization process of the FARC has created growing dissident units who joined several armed groups which in part emerged as a result of previous and somewhat unsuccessful disarmament processes of paramilitary forces active between the 1980s and early 2000s (FIP 2018a). The number of assassinations of social leaders fighting for human and indigenous rights is rising constantly, making Colombia the world’s most dangerous country for human rights activists and social leaders (UN Security Council 2018; Asmann and O’Reilly 2019). Land restitution as part of victims’ reparation has created new conflicts over land and fueled the emergence of anti-restitution armies (Nilsson and Taylor 2017). The retraction of the FARC guerrilla has spurred illegal economic activity, such as illegal mining and logging, and Colombia’s coca production is rising in areas that have increasingly become a battleground for FARC dissidents, former paramilitary groups, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army) and Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL, Popular Liberation Army) guerrilla, and new criminal gangs (FIP
The current government’s reluctance to implement the peace agreement has already imperiled the peace and incentivized recidivism, which again predominantly affects the more rural parts of the country. This precarious situation represents a defining factor for the relationship between the country’s population and the second largest military in the region and makes Colombia a prime case with which to study this relationship in a post-accord violent environment.

**Applying the relational peace framework to military–civilian relations in Colombia**

In order to investigate the level of relational peace between military and civilian actors in Colombia, this chapter is structured around the three main components of the framework, contrasting and comparing the civilian and military actors’ perspectives in each part (Söderström et al. 2021; Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction). To operationalize the framework, some adjustments were made to accommodate the particular dyad under investigation (see “Methodology” for further information on the dyad selection). In a first part about *behavioral interaction* below, actors were asked to describe previous and current points of contact with each other as a basis for evaluating levels of deliberation, non-domination, and cooperation.

In the framework’s second component dealing with *subjective conditions* of the relationship, each side of the dyad was asked to describe how they felt about the other to determine levels of mutual recognition and trust. As discussed in the Introduction, recognition involves the respect for the other’s particular identity elements as put forward in an actor’s self-image. In this particular dyad it is predominantly the military actor who has an explicit corporate identity and who is furthermore in the process of adjusting that identity to the post-accord scenario. Therefore, focus has been placed particularly, though not exclusively, on the military’s presentation of its self-image and the reception of that image among civilian actors.

Finally, the framework’s last component attempts to define the *idea of the relationship* to determine perceptions of antagonism, agonism, fellowship, or friendship. During the interviews, it soon became clear that the military actors, currently intensely engaged in a process of redefinition, were more eager to discuss their future role and relationship with civilian actors than their current relationship, which has been negatively impacted by the protracted armed conflict. This factor caused an adjustment in the use of the theoretical framework’s third component. Both actor groups were asked not only to characterize the relationship that exists between them today but also to discuss how they envision the future of that relationship. That
peaceful relationships benefit from envisioning a shared future has been well established in the literature (Lederach 1998), and as a basic principle this is often incorporated into strategies of alternative conflict transformation (Dugan 2001). However, post-war transitions often create divergent aspirations for the future (Klem 2018), and anticipation of future relations is a good indicator of the status of current relations (Schubotz 2017). This chapter therefore argues that hopes and fears attached to future visions are intrinsically conditioned by the current status of the dyad’s relationship, as well as its past, and are therefore a good indicator when current levels of relational peace for this dyad are evaluated.

Methodology

This chapter is predominantly based on thirty-seven in-depth interviews conducted during 2017 and 2018 with military and civilian actors in the capital of Colombia, Bogotá, as well as in rural communities in three regions. For more information on the interviewees, see Table 6.1 at the end of the chapter. Since the peace agreement was ratified only in the fall of 2016, the study captures a very early stage in the process toward normalizing the relationship between civilian actors (interviewee names marked with a C) and military (interviewee names marked with an M) actors, and levels of relational peace are therefore expected to be rather low at this stage.

For the military side of the dyad, two groups were selected: first, high-ranking military officers working in and from Bogotá and involved in the planning of the future role of the military either by working at COTEF, the Colombian military Command for the Transformation of the Army of the Future (Comando de la Transformación del Ejército del Futuro), or in military education and training, to capture the military elite’s understanding of its role and relationship to the civilian state and non-state actors (M1–7); and, second, military officials of lower rank stationed in the rural areas (M8–11), to see to what extent the plans in the capital had trickled down into the rural areas and to get a more in situ understanding of the military’s view of their relationship with the surrounding local communities. Colombia’s police force has been excluded from this study. Even though both the police and the military in Colombia are part of the Ministry of Defense, share the same budget, fought side by side during the conflict, and continue to have somewhat overlapping tasks, the future role of the military, which is one of the foci of this study, does not include the police force, and it is to be expected that police and military tasks will be increasingly distinct in this post-accord period. Furthermore, the level of relational peace to be achieved with the police may, and maybe even should, differ from that
achieved between civilians and the military, as regular and closer contact between police and civilians is part of daily life, while the same does not apply to the military and civilians, at least not in consolidated democracies.

It has been difficult to select which actors should be interviewed for the civilian side of the dyad, as those might range from ex-combatants and political elites to urban sectors, rural communities, and civil society actors. After careful deliberation, several groups have been intentionally left out. As since the early 2000s Colombia’s larger cities have mostly been excluded from the conflict-related violence that continues in the rural areas, the urban population’s relationship with the military in these areas has been much less conflictive than in the rural areas, and it has therefore not been selected as the focus for this study. Members of the government’s inner circle and the political and economic elites have also been excluded, as they are suspected to have specific ties with military leaders that are not characteristic of the population at large (see below). And finally, ex-combatants were not taken into consideration, as their relationship with the military in the past has been characterized by particularities that differ considerably from those of civilians who have never engaged in armed conflict. Instead, four groups were selected as those civilians who might have the lowest level of trust in the military and therefore encounter the most obstacles to establishing relational peace.

In Bogotá, interviews were conducted with representatives of civil society organizations (C1–5), to provide a more analytical perspective of the relationship between civilians and the military, alongside representatives of different governmental institutions that cooperate closely with military actors in their daily work, such as the Agency for Territorial Reconstruction (ART) (C6 and C7), the School of National Intelligence (C8), and the Ministry of Defense (C9). In the rural areas, the interviews were conducted with the aim of capturing as wide a civilian perspective as possible concerning the military, thereby including local government representatives (C10–17), local indigenous authorities (C18–21), and four group interviews with members of the local communities. Two of the group interviews consisted of local peasants in rather remote and isolated rural areas (C22, Puerto Chispas, Meta, and C23, La Granja, Córdoba), while the other two group interviews were conducted with social leaders (C24, Montería, Córdoba) and indigenous leaders (C25, Jambaló, Cauca). The number of participants, particularly in the two peasant group interviews varied greatly (from eight to sixty-five), as people passing by the selected spaces often spontaneously joined the discussions. While individual interviews allowed for more focused questioning, the group interviews, where some participants came and went during the interview, were conducted in a more unstructured way that enabled discussions among participants and provided more general impressions of the group dynamics,
Relational peace practices allowing possible underlying consensus and divergence within the groups to emerge. The logistics of arranging the group interviews in the rural areas were greatly facilitated by the author’s local network of contacts in the three selected regions. To avoid any harm to the participants, all interviews were anonymized. Including all these different civilian groups within one side of the dyad has been difficult, as they do not display a corporate identity like that of the military. To show the civilian–military dichotomy, the findings section of this chapter is therefore organized according to this civilian–military divide. However, within the sections on civilian actors, I try to differentiate between the different civilian actors participating in the study.

Finally, the main selection criteria for the rural areas were the degree of control by a myriad of illegally armed actors during the protracted conflict, the decades-long absence of state presence, and the return of the state security actors in the early 2000s that turned those areas even more into battlefields. These conditions all increased the level of hostility and mistrust between rural communities and military actors that also characterizes the post-accord period, and provides a good opportunity to study the level of relational peace between civilian and security actors. However, the three rural areas selected also present several variations, first and foremost the engagement with different conflict actors that shaped their relationship with the military. The communities selected in the Meta region in the center of Colombia, Vista Hermosa and Puerto Rico, as well as two smaller settlements (Palestina and Puerto Chispas), have historically been controlled by the FARC, the main enemy of the military, and are located within the area that became part of the demilitarized zone in the failed peace negotiations of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the Cauca region that borders the Pacific Ocean, the Nasa community of Jambaló was selected as an example of a rather isolated and well-organized indigenous community that has lived with the presence of armed actors since the mid-1980s and developed a tense relationship with the military. The Córdoba region in the north of the country, with a border along the Caribbean Sea, constitutes yet another case. The regional capital Montería and the surrounding communities of Tierralta, Puerto Libertador, and even more remote rural areas beyond Puerto Frasquillo were the birthplaces of the paramilitary groups which have constituted a serious threat to the country’s security since the 1980s, but who were allied with the military during most of the conflict period. Because of the limited sample size, this study does not aspire to make conclusions which can be generalized for the entire territory of Colombia. However, the maximum variation sought out in the selection of these three rural settings should allow the findings to speak to the relationship between civilians and the military in the rural parts of Colombia affected by the protracted conflict.
How do military and civilian actors interact with each other?

Civilian perspectives

Most members of the rural communities interviewed for this study underlined the fact that they avoid interaction with military actors stationed in or around their villages. Levels of cooperation are kept low, predominantly because of experiences of an antagonistic nature in the past, and the communities therefore do not seek after spaces for deliberation (C1–3, C10, C11, C18, C19, C21–24). At times, both actor groups have even engaged in open confrontations, which are clearly perceived by the communities as acts of domination by the military, for example when the military engages in forced eradication of coca bushes (C3, C7, C11, C12, and C23; M8). One official from the Agencia de Reconstrucción Territorial (ART) described eradication by the military as the most important obstacle to a normalized relationship between the villagers and the military today, as it counteracts civilian state efforts to provide long-term developmental alternatives to coca production as a rural livelihood (C6). The continued use of the military as a tool against social protest is a further detriment to peaceful relations, putting the two actor groups in opposition to each other (C4). “In Colombia, social protest is seen as a problem of public order and not as an exercise of human rights,” one member of a civil society organization explained (C1). Communities in rural areas that are still controlled by paramilitary groups, such as the aforementioned areas in the Córdoba region, even accused the military of accommodating those armed actors rather than providing protection from them (C24), as confirmed by one member of a mobile military unit close to Puerto Frasquillo, who described the military’s strategy concerning the paramilitary groups in the region as “we don’t mix with them and they don’t mix with us” (M9). The military has also been accused of being involved in the many infamous killings of social leaders that continue to make headlines in Colombia (Nodal 2020; TeleSurtv 2020).

Rather than cooperation, an element of competition was stressed when the relationship to the military was described, particularly by civilian state actors and civil society representatives in Bogotá, who strongly object to the Colombian security actors’ engagement in development work. According to members of COTEF, Colombia’s military has practiced the strategy of “winning hearts and minds” through development activities in the rural communities since the 1950s to avoid the possibility that local communities might develop ties with insurgent groups (M1 and M2). Both civilian state actors and civil society representatives argue that the military should not be a development actor and that its activities, perceived as being designed to merely improve the image of the military and being executed somewhat
Relational peace practices

independently, compete with civilian state initiatives for development by offering cheaper labor than civilian companies can provide. This was particularly significant for representatives of state agencies, who during the many decades of armed conflict had been affected by strong military supervision and constant demands to coordinate all activities with the military and subordinate them to security demands. These state representatives were eager to establish their newly won independence from the military and argued for a shift from security to development and a distinct separation between the two areas (C3, C10, C18, C19, and C23). This tends to indicate a desire to cut down on the need for cooperation and deliberation that had so far been characterized by a clear focus on military needs and priorities. However, in some of the more remote rural areas, civilian state actors welcomed the military’s development projects and appreciated all the help they could get in reconstructing their societies with a very limited budget. Since Colombia’s military has been attempting to “win hearts and minds” since the beginning of the conflict, the sight of military actors doing development work is quite a common sight for many Colombians (C10, C11, C15, and C16).

Military perspectives

In contrast to the civilian perceptions, the military actors in the study stress high levels of cooperation and deliberation and deny that any forms of domination characterize their relationship with their civilian counterparts. For the Colombian military, development activities are the key to both creating a good relationship with the communities who continue to be affected by high levels of violence and securing the environment against illegally armed actor control, as it believes that abandonment by the state made those areas prone to violence in the first place. To strengthen its case, the reasons the military give are predominantly practical: that it is the only state actor with the capacity to reach the more isolated rural communities; that it has battalions of military engineers standing by for construction work, ready to provide both security and development; that private companies do not dare to engage in areas where levels of violence are still rather high; and that the military simply offers better financial deals than any other actor, which benefits communities struggling with meager reconstruction budgets, as one COTEF general summed up the military’s arguments (M3). The examples it uses to illustrate this reasoning – such as the case of a community in Makarena where five civilian construction companies supposedly tried and failed to reconstruct a road of thirty-seven kilometers, until the military finally came to the rescue (M4) – seem to echo the idea of competition with the civilian development actors mentioned by the civilian actors.
themselves. However, for the military it is only logical to use the tools used and skills perfected against the enemy during war to improve development levels in peacetime, as several COTEF members underlined (M3, M4). Several programs created during the conflict survived into the post-accord period (Fé en Colombia, COPAI, Acción Integral), and through these, the military aims to decrease popular mistrust, re-establishing trust in the state and creating a new image for itself in the rural areas. It helps to build schools, roads, and housing, cleans up public spaces, and engages in a wide range of educational activities. On many occasions, these activities are coordinated with local civilian state authorities who welcome the extra budget and personnel provided by the military, as their own reconstruction budget is limited.

The collaboration of the local communities is actively sought. Through conversations with the peasants, the military commanders make a diagnosis and advise on what should be done and then serve as intermediaries with state agencies or private business partners. They even educate local communities on how to plan and present their projects and become local businesspeople, and they arrange for entrepreneurial fairs to establish connections between the communities and potential business partners (M1, M5, and M10). “Our work is of a social nature,” argues one general (M5). What is important here is the image of the military as a bridge between the population and the civilian state institutions, officials of mobile military brigades in Meta underlined (M8 and M10). This mediator role can even be extended to dealing with other countries as potential buyers of agricultural products produced in remote rural areas of Colombia, as one COTEF official argued (M1). According to military accounts, success stories abound. Military engineers have brought technology to isolated coastal areas to convert salt water into drinking water. Air force helicopters continue to fly cacao beans from a remote area to cacao-processing companies in the nearest urban center and then transport the final product to sellers in Bogotá. In so doing, according to the interviewees, the military is helping to further support a forty-year-old business agreement, and they also claim that almost all coca plantations in the area now are replaced by cacao bushes. They thus also prove that the military’s proactive, hands-on approach is more successful than the government’s drug substitution program with its long-term, slow development prospective – again underlining the competitive element. The interviewees further claim that the air force brings food, gasoline, and other essentials to remote villages that do not have any access to markets, constructs roads, provides medical services, and brings hard currency to communities that previously used grams of coca as currency (M1 and M2). The state institutions, one COTEF general underlined, come to these remote areas only during electoral campaigns: “The only ones who come here...
Relational peace practices

are the military [...] the only money circulating here is the money of the soldiers [...] The state is weak, has no capacities, is not there ... people are abandoned by the state [...]” (M3). However, as the military itself does not have a sufficiently large budget to finance all these development activities, it keeps “knocking at the doors of state institutions” to procure funding. In fact, state institutions ask the military for help with development projects, as one official of a mobile military brigade in Vista Hermosa pointed out (M8). Nevertheless, the military’s image of being a bridge between the communities and the government underlines the its desire to increase cooperation and establish common goals with as many civilian actors as possible, not only those selected for this study but also the state government itself, despite the at times derogatory comments concerning state capacity and effort, particularly in comparison with the military as previously pointed out.

How do military and civilian actors feel about each other?

Civilian perspectives

Colombian opinion polls have traditionally reported a rather positive attitude of Colombia’s population toward the military, particularly in urban areas that were no longer affected by the conflict after the early 2000s (DANE 2019: 1; 13). However, in the three focus areas a much more negative picture emerges which is closely connected to the history of conflict. Although members of the rural communities all agreed that their relationship to the military has normalized since the peace accord was signed, memories of human rights violations committed against them and state security actors’ tacit support of the human rights violations of paramilitary groups still constitute a trust barrier. “The armed forces entered with the paramilitaries,” one peasant recalled (C22). These memories pose a dilemma, as they compete with the communities’ increasing dependency on those actors for protection in the violent post-accord environment (C1, C10, C21–24). Furthermore, during long periods of the conflict, military actors simply withdrew and left the population at the mercy of the illegally armed groups (C2). Members of Jambaló’s indigenous council (Negwesx) recall that when the military finally returned in the early 2000s within the framework of President Alvaro Uribe’s counterinsurgency offensives against illegally armed actors, its presence brought armed conflict directly to the villages and thus became a detriment, rather than an advantage, to the village population (C18 and C19).

Mistrust therefore prevails and negatively affects local recognition of the military. This is particularly apparent in indigenous communities who
follow their own development and security plans and accept only their own indigenous guards as security actors in their territories. They regard all armed actors as intruders, obstacles to their security, threats to their independence, and, in the particular case of state security actors, tools of the state to control indigenous populations (C13, C18, C19, C25). “The armed forces hide behind the armed conflict and no longer respect and consult the indigenous communities [...] The government’s excuse is the armed conflict and that national security has to be maintained,” one member of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) complained (C21). With levels of violence still high and many armed actors around, state security actors are often regarded as more of a risk than a protection for the local communities, a local government official in Puerto Libertador confirmed (C16).

Furthermore, interviewees in all civilian groups expressed a perception of the military as corrupt and disrespectful of civilians, even in post-accord times (C10, C11, C13, C17, C19, C20, C21, and C25). Civil society actors, civilian state actors, and international experts alike are suspicious of the military’s growth as an influential economic actor, following a long tradition of militaries in Latin America. They fear that it undermines fundamental elements of modern democracy, including civilian control over the military, since it allows the military to secure significant sources of revenue independent of government allocation, gain advantageous access to state resources, and maintain a tradition of non-defense roles that make it a go-to provider on development issues where civilians should predominate (Mani 2016; C2, C8, and C19).

Military perspectives

This level of mistrust is reciprocated by the military in its attitude toward different groups of civilians, as exemplified by the clash over collective memory and human rights violations committed during the long conflict, which has caused much national debate in Colombia. The military claims it is misrepresented in the presentations of collective memory published by civil society organizations which blame the military and paramilitary groups for more human rights violations than the guerrilla. One such publication is Basta ya!, published by the National Center for Historic Memory in 2013. The Colombian army has therefore taken it upon itself to write its own narrative of what happened during the war, albeit with the help of supportive academics. This could be interpreted as an act of deliberation and a first step toward a constructive dialogue. However, the military also used its power with the government to occupy seats at the board of the National Center for Historic Memory. Fearing the influence of the center’s
publication on the truth commission set up by the process of transitional justice already initiated in the country, it demanded that a new report be written (M1 and M2; C2). This constitutes an act of domination and certainly underlines a power disparity between the two dyad actors.

Mistrust of rural communities is often displayed when the military engages in suppressing social protest or eradicating coca bushes. However, the predominant attitude in the interviews with military actors was a sense of benevolent paternalism, a form of thin recognition, which became particularly visible when military interviewees described their development work in the rural communities. “The end goal,” one COTEF general underlined:

is to transform the community from a disorganized village controlled by armed actors and illicit dealings to a community that is organized and free of illegal business and armed actors, that has local businesses generating jobs contributing to the state, and that does not need the military, since they are able to control their own security. (M3)

The self-image emerging from interviews with members of the military is rather positive, to say the least. They describe themselves as loyal, dependable, flexible, peaceful, democratic, God-fearing, honorable, reform-oriented, and heroic, creating a particularly strong contrast to the descriptions of the rural communities (above) and the state (below). Several COTEF generals underlined the fact that the military even shows forgiveness toward ex-members of the FARC who have now joined the communities they are to protect (M3 and M4), and one went so far as to argue that during the past fifteen years, and even today, more guerrilla have turned to the military for demilitarization processes than to the relevant state agencies because the armed forces enjoy an image of honesty and fairness (M1). The military sees itself as the good face of the state. Where the state is negligent, the military emerges as the only actor complying with its promises to solve the problems for remote communities and stand steadfastly by their side as protectors and benefactors, bridging the distance between state and citizens, as COTEF members confirm (M1 and M2). A recurring image is the abandonment of people by the state as the main cause for the decades-long conflict, compared with the omnipresence of the military in every corner of the country today. One commander of a mobile military brigade in Montería emphasized that “in the most remote vereda [area/village] you will find a soldier […] no area in Colombia is forbidden for the army” (M11). Where the government is corrupt and undemocratic, soldiers are transparent and honorable, pillars of democracy rather than threats to it. One COTEF official quoted an indigenous leader stating that “the government does not comply with its promises, but the military does” (M1). Where the government is dysfunctional and slow, it steps in. Another general interviewed boasted,
“while the military runs like a rabbit, the state moves like a turtle” (M3). While politicians represent the political and economic elites of the country, the military represents the lower classes. Where the state is weakened by political discord, the military remains democratic and apolitical (M1).

Views of the relationship

Civilian perspectives

While civilian and military attitudes toward their relationship often seem to be rather contradictory, there is one issue that most civilian and military actors agree on: the apolitical nature of the military, which is a major factor determining the future of the relationship between civilians and the military in Colombia. There is a surprisingly widespread belief among civil society representatives and civilian state actors alike that the military is unlikely to step in as a political actor to overthrow an elected government, which simply rejects the core fear expressed in the debate on civil–military relations (C2, C4, C5, C8, and C9), and this view is also shared by the military informants (M1, M4–6). The argument most used by the interviewees to underline this apolitical nature of the Colombian military focuses on the existence of a pact of coexistence between the military and Colombia’s political elite dating back to 1958, which closely resembles Huntington’s (1957) civil–military bargain that established clear divisions between civilian state elites and military actors. This pact determines a division of labor whereby state security actors enjoy relative independence and take care of public order, security, and national defense without civilian interference, but in return stay out of politics. In the eyes of many civilians interviewed, this arrangement guarantees a stability that is beneficial to both sides and is also likely to characterize a future relationship.

However, the same interviewees also recognize that this agreement has a downside, as it turns the military into a tool for the political and governmental sector, lowers the quality of democracy, maintains corruption, and blocks any reform efforts, particularly in the countryside. As it is associated with the conservative political forces, the military is accused of servicing particular interests of politicians at the local level, such as protecting landowners and the business sector at the expense of the local peasantry and blocking land reforms. In fact, the military is accused of doing the “dirty work for politicians,” one civil society organization member in Bogotá underlined (C5). The accusation of corruption also surfaces in many interviews, embedding the military in a web of relationships with paramilitary, criminal, and drug-trafficking groups. Despite all this criticism, however, civil society and
civilian state actors seem to have resigned themselves to the fact that the military will always play a strong role in Colombia (C1, C4, C5, C8, and C9).

Military perspectives

Just how strong the military envisions its role to be in the future, and how it sees its relationship to all civilian counterparts, was a topic readily discussed in many military interviews. The basis for the military conception of that role is the argument that the military has its roots in, and derives its legitimacy from, the people. Many interviewees underlined common soldiers’ shared identity with the working class and argued that even their superiors did not come from the political elites, in contrast to the leaders of many other Latin American militaries. COTEF officials upheld that they understand the population and can identify their needs better than the political elites and are therefore the natural bridge between the poorer constituencies in Colombia and their government (M1 and M5). One general even went so far as to proclaim that “the peasant is our reason to exist” (M4). The fact that (mostly urban) opinion polls prove that the subjects of their protection feel the same way is underlined in virtually every interview. Propaganda signposts everywhere in Colombia point out that soldiers are prepared to give their lives for civilians. A recent film clip that was widely discussed across Colombia featured soldiers passing through rural villages and people expressing their thanks. A little boy salutes a lieutenant and says, “Lieutenant, the country sends me to thank you,” and then the lieutenant goes and tells his colonel “my colonel, Colombia sends you thanks,” as was told to the author by an official of the School of National Intelligence in Bogotá (C8). Where communities reject state security actors, as in the three areas that are the focus of this study, the military maintained that the image of the soldier was not destroyed by the latter’s alleged human rights violations but by illegally armed actors purposefully tainting it (M1, M6, M8, and M10).

The military’s proclaimed roots in the poorest parts of society constitute an important building block in the process of preparing Colombia’s military for the new post-accord, post-FARC future. This heritage also legitimizes a future role that enhances, rather than diminishes, the presence of the military in peacetimes and where the institution’s resources, leadership, knowledge, and skills are used to confront a threat that was rather fuzzily described as “hybrid, volatile, ambiguous, uncertain, and complex” (M4). “Imagine a country that understands the capacities of the armed forces,” one COTEF general daydreamed (M4). To grow into this larger, even more important future role, COTEF has started an ambitious transformation process that is designed to prepare the army of the future for its multiple mission (M3 and M4). The military of the future no longer only protects
but assists and develops. “The army is construction, the army is education, the army is health,” one COTEF general announced (M3). In the military’s “Plan Victoria Plus,” human security goals such as reducing corruption and poverty and improving development are now added to its more traditional tasks, all to be achieved in close cooperation with civilian actors (M2, M4, M7, and M11). The military’s rather grandiose perception concerning its post-accord role is not too surprising, given its increase in power and independence during the country’s protracted social conflict as well as its previously mentioned agreement with the political elites, and similar developments have been observed as well in other post-accord countries (Herath 2012). Furthermore, Latin American militaries have traditionally pursued a larger array of activities that reach beyond the actual duties assigned to militaries in other parts of the world (Mani 2016; Montenegro 2018).

This process of moving toward a future omnipresence of the military and a closer civil–military cooperation started in 2018 with the implementation of the “Plan Horos,” supposedly at the request of rural communities that had suffered from state neglect for decades. Replacing the insufficient numbers of mobile army units, “Plan Horos” aims to establish a permanent army presence in a number of former conflict areas in thirteen departments, including those which today are relatively secure, in order to avoid the recurrence of violence and serve as bridges between the communities and the state (M4). “In Colombia, the people want to see their soldiers, they demand the presence of their army in the streets, in the territory,” one COTEF general underlined (M3).

Conclusions

Applied to the Colombian case, the relational peace framework provides an important and valuable tool for comparison and categorization, particularly by offering specific components that help to identify the stark differences displayed by the dyad actors under consideration in this study in terms of their perceptions of each other and their relationship. By helping to identify these differences, which pose significant obstacles and challenges to the ability of the relationship to achieve a higher level of relational peace in the future, the framework therefore also provides a point of departure from which to look into the future of relational peace and devise strategies to overcome those obstacles.

After listening to the voices of military and civilian actor groups expressing their understanding of their relationship to each other and its future, this study concludes that, at this early stage of Colombia’s post-accord history, relational peace between the dyad actors has been achieved on the lowest level, that of peace between agonists, only. At this point in time, that
relationship is essentially dominated by the understanding prevalent on both sides that the military is there to stay and that its traditionally strong role in the country and agreement with the political and economic elites make major changes in the relationship between the dyad actors impossible. The continued existence of illegally armed actors and the high level of insecurity in the countryside certainly help to cement that understanding. Thus, dyad actors have recognized interdependence and the need to associate, when necessary, while at the same time displaying low levels of trust and cooperation. The possibility of an escalation into a more violent relationship seems somewhat remote – as remote as an improvement of the relationship toward trust, cooperation, empathy, and shared goals.

The latter has much to do with power asymmetry. As one of the dyad actors possesses coercive power, the power disparity between the two actor groups is strong. This enables the military to display a mix of behavior that is dominating (suppression of social protest, fumigation and forced eradication of coca plantations as a strategy to combat the country’s cocaine trade) and cooperating (development activities, security provision). While development activities are rejected by some civilian actors and welcomed by others, most civilians interviewed for this study try to avoid interacting with the military. However, the relationship is not characterized by any regular signs of manipulation or coercion, even though occasional clashes, as for example over military actions such as forced eradication of coca bushes, the suppression of social protest, or the conflict over collective memory, persist. Still, efforts to increase cooperation and deliberation are definitely stronger on the military side, while most civilian actors included in this study remain guarded. Overall, the military seems open to dialogue, but also pushes its objectives through where needed. Disagreements are acknowledged in both actor groups. A low level of behavioral interaction certainly exists, but cooperation in terms of shared goals and interests seems still largely unattained. In fact, the element of competition, particularly over developmental work that entered the relationship in the post-accord phase, may well constitute a growing obstacle to cooperation in the future, particularly regarding the power asymmetry between the dyad actors. Much less congruence seems to exist in terms of the actors’ subjective experiences of the other, and this constitutes a major obstacle to increased cooperation. Mutual recognition is mostly thin, and the behavior of the other is observed with much reserve and suspicion. The military’s self-image clashes decisively with the image of the military prevailing in the groups of civilian actors that voiced their opinions in this study, and levels of trust, empathy, appreciation, and respect between the two sides are generally low.

That leaves the question of whether – and how – the dyad will be able to advance from the current level of peace between agonists toward a higher
level of relational peace in the future. This study shows how strongly the history of a relationship plays into current conceptualizations and even impacts future relationship expectations. Still haunted by memories of human rights violations committed by the military against civilians and state security actors’ tacit support of the brutalities of paramilitary groups during the decades of armed conflict, the civilian side of the dyad interviewed for this study is stuck in an agonistic relationship with the military and shies away from a stronger relationship. The Colombian military, on the other hand, is determined to leave the past behind as quickly as possible and considers closer cooperation with civilians and increased interdependence to be an important basis for its extended future role. To increase mutual respect, trust, and cooperation, the cornerstones of higher levels of relational peace, the military as the stronger, more powerful, and more dominant actor in this particular dyad will have to take the first steps and cooperate with the government in implementing deeper structural changes. These might include a change in strategy – such as abstaining from contradictory and adverse actions in rural communities as outlined above and refraining from competing with civilian state and non-state actors concerning its expanding role in development – or they might demand structural changes such as a clear separation from the police in terms of areas of involvement, tasks, and budget, a commitment to transitional justice and the fight against impunity for military personnel, and a more clearly delimited role for the future. Such structural steps would prevent the military from becoming even more independent and powerful.

However, far from its taking a step in that direction, there are indicators that the military’s pact with the political elites will strengthen its role and independence even further and contribute to future mistrust and lack of cooperation between the dyad actors. Fumigation of coca plantations, abandoned temporarily during the peace negotiations, is in full swing again (FIP 2018b; Nilsson and González 2021). In May 2019, after accusations that the military violated civilians’ human rights in rural areas, then Colombian President Ivan Duque, a stark representative of the conservative political-economic elite, established the Presidential Commission of Military Excellence. The body was tasked with scrutinizing military doctrines for their compliance with human rights and international humanitarian rights law. However, the commission, which was accused of consisting only of friends of the conservative elites, could not find any fault in the military’s doctrines and regulations (Duque 2020). In January 2019, the government released a rather bellicose security plan that provided for the creation of citizen security networks (redes de participación cívica) to provide information to the military in zones under the control of criminal groups (Ministry of Defense 2019). This government security plan imitated the infamous convivir groups of the
1990s, reviving the possibility of new paramilitary formations in Colombia and provoking the question of whether the country is going backward rather than forward toward relational peace.

Colombia is but one of many examples, in Latin America and elsewhere, where post-accord militaries in strong positions and with numbers inflated by protracted social conflict carve out a new role for themselves, including their relationship with civilian actor groups. Future case study research needs to look at those extended roles of military actors that are, at least in part, legitimized by the high levels of violence often persisting after peace accords and consider how far they are acceptable to civilian actors. How do they affect relational peace and in what way do they impact sustainable democracy? This discussion links back to the core debate over what form civil–military relations should take in democracies. However, the relational peace framework does not suggest that all dyads necessarily must achieve higher orders of relational peace for peace to be sustainable. Friendship as the ultimate goal for a relationship might be desirable for other actor dyads, such as, for example, communities that have engaged in conflict with each other or their relations with ex-combatants from illegally armed actor groups who have gone through a disarmament and reintegration process. However, the question is how much further the relationship between a civilian population and its country’s military needs to be developed in the first place. While respect, trust, and cooperation do need to reach a certain level, some degree of critical distance might be healthier for a democratic state than excessively close and regular cooperation. A stable level of peace between fellows – not friends – should perhaps be the final goal.

A final note is in order concerning the difficulty of looking at “civil”–military relations once research is expanded to include civilian actors other than political and economic elites: the “fuzziness” of the civilian actor side. The study’s findings are based, among others, on interviews with predominantly rural communities, as it is those rural communities who continue to live in environments with high levels of violence. Here, relational peace between civilian and military actors is of most importance, and efforts need to be directed to those relationships. However, the military’s relationship might not be agonistic with all civilian actor groups. When this research was conducted, civilians in larger urban centers in Colombia who had lived removed from the conflict scene for years responded much more positively to the military as an actor than did their rural counterparts, as has been pointed out above (see DANE 2019). However, recent opinion polls show that even civilians in urban areas are beginning to distance themselves from the military as an actor after a number of scandals revealed blatant human rights violations committed by the military even recently against civilians in rural areas (El Espectador 2020). The myriad of actors that characterize
the “civil” side in that relationship, in Colombia as well as other countries, will always allow for relationships to develop in both directions, toward as well as away from each other. In the end, however, friendship might be neither attainable nor desirable as the ultimate form of relational peace for civil–military relations.

Notes

1 Fe en Colombia (Faith in Colombia) is an inter-institutional program created in 2015 and designed to strengthen cooperation between state agencies, international organizations, and private business to increase security and strengthen governability.

2 Acción Integral (Integral Action) is a military institution and the main coordinating unit of all military development counterinsurgency efforts in Bogotá. It was created in 1964 in connection to the “Plan Laso,” the beginning of counterinsurgency development measures, to plan, finance, and coordinate those activities in remote areas, and predominantly draws on resources from the budget of the Ministry of Defense (M11).

3 However, an experimental survey in the more remote rural areas with more guerrilla and coca plantation presence showed that, because of security risks, people in those areas do not reveal their true preferences and are much less in favour of the military (only 6.3 percent) (Matanok and Garcia-Sanchez 2018).

4 The Special Vigilance and Private Security Services, commonly called convivir, were a national program of neighborhood watch groups created in 1994 by the Colombian Ministry of Defense to deal with growing guerrilla activities, mainly in the countryside. The convivir gained a bad reputation because of their association with paramilitary groups and because they resembled similar organizations created by the Colombian government during the 1960s where civilians were trained for internal security purposes and which constituted the beginning of paramilitary organizations in Colombia.

References


### Table 6.1 List of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee abbreviation</th>
<th>Rank/position</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Location of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>Retired coronel, member of COTEF</td>
<td>April 17, 2017</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2</td>
<td>Coronel, COTEF</td>
<td>April 21, 2017</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3</td>
<td>General, COTEF</td>
<td>April 19, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4</td>
<td>General, COTEF</td>
<td>April 23, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5</td>
<td>Teniente Coronel, Acción Integral</td>
<td>April 23, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M6</td>
<td>Coronel, Escuela Superior de Guerra</td>
<td>April 24, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M7</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>April 24, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M8</td>
<td>Official, mobile army brigade</td>
<td>September 12, 2017</td>
<td>Vista Hermosa, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M9</td>
<td>Military official guarding the river</td>
<td>September 24, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Frasquillo, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M10</td>
<td>Commander, mobile army brigade</td>
<td>September 13, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Rico, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M11</td>
<td>Commander, mobile army brigade</td>
<td>September 28, 2017</td>
<td>Montería, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Member, CINEP</td>
<td>March 11, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>University expert</td>
<td>May 16, 2017</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>University expert</td>
<td>September 23, 2017</td>
<td>Montería, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Member, Fundación Paz y Reconciliación</td>
<td>April 17, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>CIPE official</td>
<td>April 13, 2018</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>ART official</td>
<td>May 13, 2017</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>ART official</td>
<td>May 12, 2017</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>School of intelligence official</td>
<td>April 4, 2018</td>
<td>School of National Intelligence, Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>Ministry of Defense official</td>
<td>April 23, 2018</td>
<td>Ministry of Defence, Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10</td>
<td>Local government official</td>
<td>September 13, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Rico, Meta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.1 List of interviews (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee abbreviation</th>
<th>Rank/position</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Location of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>Personero (human rights ombudsman, city council)</td>
<td>September 12, 2017</td>
<td>Vista Hermosa, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>Personero (human rights ombudsman, city council)</td>
<td>September 13, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Rico, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13</td>
<td>Government secretary</td>
<td>September 19, 2017</td>
<td>Jambaló, Cauca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C14</td>
<td>Municipal council member</td>
<td>September 13, 2017</td>
<td>Vista Hermosa, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>Local government official</td>
<td>September 11, 2017</td>
<td>Vista Hermosa, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16</td>
<td>Local government official</td>
<td>September 26, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Libertador, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17</td>
<td>Municipal council member</td>
<td>September 27, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Libertador, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C18</td>
<td>Negwex member</td>
<td>September 20, 2017</td>
<td>Jambaló, Cauca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C19</td>
<td>Negwex member</td>
<td>September 20, 2017</td>
<td>Jambaló, Cauca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C20</td>
<td>Indigenous leader, governor of indigenous protection zone</td>
<td>September 27, 2017</td>
<td>Montería, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C21</td>
<td>Indigenous leader, member of ONIC</td>
<td>September 25, 2017</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C22</td>
<td>Assembly of local villagers (65)</td>
<td>September 13, 2017</td>
<td>Puerto Chispas, Meta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C23</td>
<td>La Granga agricultural project participants (8)</td>
<td>September 24, 2017</td>
<td>La Granga, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C24</td>
<td>Group of social leaders (9–11)</td>
<td>September 23, 2017</td>
<td>Montería, Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C25</td>
<td>Group of indigenous leaders (8–10)</td>
<td>September 18, 2017</td>
<td>Jambaló, Cauca</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>