

# FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

## Reflexions on the experience of POLSEDE and its usefulness in the present

By **Bernardo Arévalo de León**

**F**ifteen years ago, when those of us who worked in the area of security studies at FLACSO identified the need to establish an inclusive and participatory dialogue concerning the challenges of security that Guatemala was facing, this was another country. Three years before, an end was finally put to the internal armed conflict that had bled us for more than three decades. The national agenda – those issues that people were focused on – still reflected what is technically known as the “post-conflict” moment: the debate concerning the conditions and the strategies that would allow our society to overcome definitively the cycle of violence and the causes that explain its origins.

One of the central issues of that agenda had to do with the transformation of the armed forces. The country was entering into a new era of peace with a military apparatus shaped by and for counterinsurgency violence. The perverse logic of the “internal enemy” – an inevitable conclusion given the inability to find peaceful solutions to political crises – had generated doctrines, strategies, structures, and mentalities that not only became unnecessary – there is no need for counterinsurgency when the insurgency is over – but dangerous. Within a democratic State, the army cannot turn its citizens into “enemies” and transform them into the objective of its military force.

The need to transform the military apparatus was beyond doubt. The new conditions the country was living in required a double transformation: from an army designed to fight a war to an army at the service of peace; from an army required to satisfy the needs for coercion by an authoritarian State to an army organized to serve a democracy. The Democratic Security Treaty Framework in Central America, signed by the Central American governments in 1995, had already identified this need by establishing a general set of values, principles, and objectives that should guide security policies and practices in the democratic societies that were beginning to appear in the region. The “Agreement to Strengthen Civil Authority and the Role of the Army in a Democratic Society”, an integral part of the Peace Accords, had established concrete objectives

and parameters for our country. By building on these, progress could be made to identify the set of measures that would be needed to transform mindsets and implement security in the country, as well as setting down the legal and institutional framework for State management of security consistent with a democratic State under rule of law.

However, it soon became evident that this step, for which the necessary conditions had already been met, was encountering some obstacles. Some, those that had to do with resistance to change at the very core of the armed forces, were anticipated: every bureau-

tance of the issue possessed few ideas that would enable them to move beyond complaints that for lack of proposals began to sound empty. And the polarized context that enveloped the issue made it impossible to broach it in a measured and reflexive manner. The peace signed on paper did not go so far as to influence attitudes and wills.

POLSEDE (Toward a Security Policy for Democracy) was born as an attempt to overcome these obstacles. Its purpose was to broach the issue of security in an inclusive and participatory forum in which actors from the State and society, civilians and

organizations of civil society, and ten individuals who were invited as experts. All of them – institutions, organizations, individuals -- were (and many still are) key players in the field of military security (see list). With the methodological support of WSP International – which had implemented a successful process of dialogue immediately after the signing of the Peace Accords – and within the framework of the United Nations Development Programme in Guatemala, a space was set apart in which military officers and civilians worked jointly in an unprecedented effort of study and dialogue. The effort speaks for itself: four years that involved

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cracy sticks by the certitudes of its origins and experience and does not sacrifice them voluntarily, especially when the paradigm implicit in this change carries with it a profound criticism of the images of itself and its role in society that this group holds. Less anticipated were those from other sectors. Within the Government, the disinterest about these matters by the majority of its officials – beginning with those in the highest positions – was reflected in their incapacity to take the initiative. The political class had no interest in getting involved in an issue that, according to its experience, offered very few benefits and many risks. Those in civil society who were conscious of the impor-

soldiers, came together in a collaborative effort conceived not in zero sum terms (“if you win, I lose”), a characteristic of political negotiations which, in a polarized context, frequently deepen divisions. Conditions were sought that would allow this grouping of actors – diverse and frequently opposed – to initiate a process of plural reflexion that would lead to a different security policy: a shared conceptual framework, common objectives, and collaborative strategies.

Finally, after a patient process of explanation and persuasion, the process began with the participation of five government offices, sixteen academic institutions and

close to 200 individuals, eight plenary sessions, three international conferences, six technical working groups that each met around forty times, all under an ambitious agenda that encompassed a wide range of issues, from a new conceptual framework to regulate military responsibilities in a democracy to the operational and organizational details of intelligence gathering.

The process was complex and, on occasion, tortuous. A history of mutual hatreds and bitterness – in addition to three decades of war, more than 200,000 victims, the demonizing of the adversary – weighed heavily on the actors who, sometimes, were deeply split

# List of participants POLSEDE

## Government

Ministerio de la Defensa  
Ministerio de Gobernación  
Secretaría de la Paz (SEPAZ)  
Secretaría de Análisis Estratégico (SAE)  
Secretaría Administrativa y de Seguridad de la Presidencia (SAAS)

## Academia and Civil Society Organizations

Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES)  
Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales (AVANCSO)  
Centro de Investigaciones Económicas Nacionales (CIEN)  
Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO)  
Fundación Myma Mack (FMM)  
Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Políticos (INCEP)  
Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES)  
Instituto de Estudios Políticos, Económicos y Sociales (IPES)  
Instituto de Relaciones Internacionales y de Investigación para la Paz (IRIPAZ)  
Centro de Acción Legal para los Derechos Humanos (CALDH)  
Seguridad en Democracia (SEDEM)  
Instituto de Estudios Comparados en Ciencias Penales de Guatemala (ICCPG)  
Centro de Estudios de Guatemala (CEG)  
Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Universidad Rafael Landívar (URL)  
Escuela de Ciencia Política, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC)  
Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Rurales (CEUR), Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC)

## Individual participants

Gen. Julio Balconi  
Dr. Gabriel Aguilera Peralta  
Lic. Guillermo Pacheco  
Gen. Héctor Alejandro Gramajo  
Tte. Cnel. Mauricio Lopez Bonilla  
Cnel. Mario Mérida  
Dr. Héctor Rosada Granados  
Lic. Humberto Preti  
Lic. Álvaro Pop  
Gen. Otto Pérez Molina

between accepting the rational need to carry on with the work and their emotional resistance to accept and relate to “the other.” But the use of a method that gradually built up confidence and allowed for a rational and balanced discussion of the issues, the respect for the rules of the game that assured an impartial process, and the will to leave behind a past full of violence allowed for consensus building around a series of topics, from those of a general nature – a text that analyzed the guidelines for military security in a democracy – to specific concerns – a draft of a law to regulate intelligence gathering in Guatemala. In the end, this collection of actors from diverse sectors of society and the State, who had participated in a history full of polarization and mistrust when not directly confronted in the line of battle, with diverse and opposed ideas on political and security matters, found a space to come together under common interests and objectives: twelve documents that reflect the outlines of this unusual meeting, that were condensed in four documents containing concrete recommendations in specific fields:

- a. Conceptual foundations for taking military issues into consideration in the Guatemala of the 20th century.*
- b. Proposal for a reform of the security system.*
- c. Proposal for a reform of the intelligence system.*
- d. Proposal for a redefinition of the role of the military.*

The scope of these agreements – the extent to which they influenced the process of transformation of the military and the construction of new institutional security frameworks – has varied. When the moment was right, the recommendations put forward fuelled and enriched a necessary public debate around the needs for security. Some of these documents set the ground for new exercises in dialogue and rapprochement, as was the case of the discussions about a new defence policy that the Ministry of Defence organized shortly afterwards with the participation of civil society. Others provided inputs for the preparation of institutional and legal reforms, such as the documents that dealt with intelligence matters which, in turn, assisted politicians and experts in

their reflexions on this complex and opaque set of problems. The effect was one of accretion: an external evaluation done nearly ten years later identified POLSEDE as the origin of a new security paradigm that gradually permeated the discourse and the thinking on this issue and that, added on to subsequent efforts, had come to influence sixty legislative bills in ten years.

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radigm of democratic security.

- The establishment of the Programme to Strengthen Civil Society Capacities in Matters of Security (FOSS), which for more than six years assisted organizations of civil society to become technically knowledgeable about these issues.
- The establishment of opportunities for dialogue to create the Advisory Council on Security, within which the State and civil society agreed upon the terms that allowed for the implementation of this commitment of the AFPC (Agreement on the Strengthening of Civilian Power and the Role of the Armed Forces in a Democratic Society)

Policy for the Ministry of Defence; of the agreement signed by organizations of civil society that specialized in these topics under the FOSS initiative with the Congress of the Republic to provide technical inputs for the corresponding legislative committees; and of the series of dialogue sessions that over the years have brought together State institutions and organizations of civil society to discuss matters related to security in the country. In contrast to other countries in the region, the channels of communication between State and society on these issues have remained open and the interaction continues regularly.

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participants that went beyond the scope of the project. The positive experience of joint efforts, the concrete results evidenced in cooperation, the consensus forged around each issue that came together around a common platform, and the methods learned during this exercise conducive to a reflexive dialogue, allowed these actors to continue to interact constructively in diverse venues. Some of these were an extension of the project itself, initiatives adopted by the participants to provide continuity to the efforts that were being made within it:

- The creation of the Guatemala Network for Democratic Security that brought together military officers and civilians in a “security community” linked to the new pa-

- The Project in Support of a Citizen Security Policy (POLSEC), set up under the initiative of the participants in POLSEDE to transfer the analytical framework and dialogue mechanisms to the wider debate about public security and which during two years of work reached important conclusions and recommendations in this matter.

Others were initiatives adopted by the participants in the process of POLSEDE that, encouraged by the possibilities that dialogue had evidenced and empowered by the skills and the tools acquired within the process, were applied in other institutional environments. Such was the case of the process of dialogue to formulate a Defence

This does not mean that from then on everything went smoothly in matters of security and defence, and that all interaction between actors in society and State has been characterized by coordination and harmony. The work undertaken by POLSEDE – and its ramifications – made an important contribution, undoubtedly, to the effort to adapt the institutional framework for security in the country to the tasks of security in a democratic State. But this transformation is a process still incomplete in a number of aspects. A security crisis began to unfold at the influx of national and international factors that influenced a very rapid increase in violence, both in quantity and intensity, and created an environment of inse-



curity that affected and continues to affect Guatemalan society at all levels and over all its territory. Guatemalan society today is concerned and worried about a reality that takes on the form of: levels of violence comparable to those of war zones; forms of violence characterized by excessive cruelty and challenges that overwhelm the State's capacity to respond and that generate violent reactions from society, which only add to the problem. The need to address these situations – to respond to the demands of the affected population – and the short-term attitudes that unfortunately characterize the government's actions, began to distract attention from the efforts of institutional transformation which, had they been completed, would have improved noticeably the State's capacity to address the problem.

It is no longer a matter of a necessary transformation of a political and institutional agenda linked to the coun-

cooperation to address a problem which affects us all and which extends beyond the capacities that each of the actors in society and the State, independently, have at their disposal. It's not a matter, after all, of problems derived exclusively from post-conflict scenarios. The processes and tools that in Guatemala were tried within the framework of the process of dialogue after the signing of the Peace Accords – including POLSEDE and its offspring – are starting to be used in countries with stable and institutionalized democracies to address social problems that require collaboration between State and society – the implementation of concrete and coordinated actions by different actors working towards a common objective – that are beyond the bounds of their institutional frameworks. This is what is known as “collective impact” and is applied in countries such as the United States, for example, in the prevention of highway accidents or educational reforms.

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try's democratization. After the signing of the Peace Accords, the agenda centred on a complex process of institutional transformation that – above and beyond being a political commitment that involved different aspects of the social and political life of the country – was indispensable to bring the institutional framework of the State into line with a new cycle in the political life of the country: that of democracy. Today the necessary transformations have to deal with the best use of institutional resources that the country possesses to allow the State to address, effectively and efficiently, the threats to the security of the lives and properties of its citizens, a fundamental condition for the consolidation of every democracy. These are different problems in a different country.

But history weighs on the present, and as every society is the product of its own experience, we continue to drag along some of the problems that required at that moment in time an extraordinary effort to enable a process of collective reflexion. We are still held back by mistrust, resentment, an absence of shared horizons, and technical doubts, all of which inhibit the necessary

What is new in these countries is not new for us. We already possess the conceptual and methodological tools required to develop an efforts of this type. We also have the capacities – technical, dialogue-related – in different areas of society and the State, among those individuals and institutions that, regardless of the problems they face, continue to believe in, and recur to, dialogue. That is the most important legacy of POLSEDE: the recommendations that were produced at that moment – at least some of them – might have lost their validity but the skills and attitudes that remained in individuals – and through them – in the institutions that participated in those years represent the capacities which are in place to build higher levels of collaboration and convergence. The country requires it. Maybe it's the time to put them to use.

Because violence and coercion are rooted in long-term historical dynamics that permeate a society's social and political life, we believe that the social and political processes necessary to transform the way a society functions take generations, and cannot be achieved through quick-fixes. Therefore, peacebuilding efforts have to be conceived as mid- to long-term strategies that work for cumulative and incremental impact.

Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper.

