

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Vice President Pence's Trip to Central and South America: An Opportunity to Reestablish U.S. Leadership in Latin America

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From August 13–18, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Panama. This trip serves as a follow-up to a multinational conference co-hosted by the U.S. and Mexico on “Prosperity and Security in Central America” in mid-June. The Vice President should use this trip to highlight important partnerships with the countries and reaffirm U.S. commitment to their respective sub-regions. Specifically, the Vice President should reaffirm U.S. commitment to security and prosperity in Central and South America, U.S. support for a responsible implementation of the Colombian peace process, and U.S. commitment to addressing the crisis in Venezuela.

### America's Enduring Commitment to Central and South America

**Argentina.** In Argentina, the Vice President will meet with President Mauricio Macri and other government officials. Argentina is a country in the midst of an ambitious comeback after over a decade of misrule and economic mismanagement by now-deceased President Nestor Kirchner and his successor and wife, Cristina Kirchner. The Kirchners' 12-year rule, from 2003–2007 and 2007–2015, saw Argentina's rank in the annual Heritage Founda-

tion *Index of Economic Freedom* drop from “mostly unfree” to the worst rating of “repressed.”<sup>1</sup>

While the U.S. and Argentina have traditionally experienced a strong and friendly bilateral relationship, the Kirchner years were quite tense. The Kirchners were strong supporters of Hugo Chavez's anti-American regional movement and expanded relationships with U.S. adversaries such as Iran and Russia.

Going into his second year, President Macri has been focused on getting his country's financial house in order and repairing its relations abroad. Vice President Pence should contribute to these efforts and look to pursue closer economic relations with Argentina.

**Chile.** While in Chile, Vice President Pence will meet with President Michelle Bachelet, who is in the final stretch of her second, non-consecutive term as president. Chile is the most prosperous and safest country in all of Latin America and one of America's strongest regional partners. In the Western Hemisphere, it is second to only Canada and ahead of the U.S. in terms of economic freedom.<sup>2</sup> Since 2004, the U.S. and Chile have had a bilateral free trade agreement, and since 2014, Chile has been designated a member of the U.S. Visa Waiver Program.<sup>3</sup>

Much like Argentina and other regional countries, political tides are shifting away from the left and toward center-right movements. Although Chile is a traditional pro-market and pro-democracy-orientated country, socialist Bachelet has endangered Chile's historic success in that respect. Bachelet's cooperation with the U.S. on issues regarding Venezuela has been lackluster. Chile's upcoming presidential elections in November could signal a return

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back to a center-right government, which could provide the U.S. with a more willing regional partner.

**Colombia.** In Colombia, Vice President Pence will meet with President Juan Manuel Santos and other Colombian government officials. Colombia is arguably America's staunchest ally in Latin America, as well as the United States' largest foreign-aid recipient. It is also Latin America's oldest democracy. Colombia is located in the northern part of the Andean Ridge, which produces the vast majority of the world's cocaine. Colombia alone is the world's top cocaine-producing country, as well as the source of 95 percent of cocaine bound for the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

For over half a century, Colombia was locked in a war against the domestic terrorist group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which used the drug trade to finance its operations. Due to the FARC and Colombian drug cartels, Colombia became a failed state. U.S. efforts to support Colombia ramped up in the year 2000 with the implementation of "Plan Colombia," a U.S.-sponsored security and development package that ended in 2015. As a result, Colombian cartels and FARC have been significantly weakened. Colombia recently signed a peace deal with FARC, formally ending the 52-year conflict.

During the four-year peace talks, concessions granted to FARC in the form of weakened counter-narcotics initiatives have led to a massive spike in coca cultivation.<sup>5</sup> A historic 188,000 hectares of cocaine were cultivated in 2016, in comparison to the 83,000 cultivated in 2011.<sup>6</sup> Vice President Pence should emphasize U.S. commitment to a responsible implementation of the FARC peace deal.

**Panama.** In Panama, Vice President Pence will meet with President Juan Carlos Varela and other

Panamanian government officials. Costa Rica and Panama remain the prosperous exceptions in poverty-stricken Central America. Panama is a leading member of various free trade blocs and a member of the U.S. Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement. Panama has been a strong partner in regional security issues and confronting Venezuela's regional hostility. The Vice President should continue advancing cooperation with Panama on both fronts.

### The Way Forward

Vice President Pence's trip to Latin America provides a great opportunity to follow up on the initiatives developed during the Central America conference and deepen relationships with four important countries. While traveling to Central and South America, the Vice President should:

- **Expand the regional coalition for unified action against Venezuela.** Venezuela should be a high priority for the regional visit. The crisis in Venezuela is a problem for all of Latin America. Leaders and stakeholders must join efforts at helping restore Venezuela's democracy and addressing the humanitarian crisis.
- **Urge the Colombian government to responsibly implement the FARC peace agreement and reduce the cocaine cultivation boom.** As the U.S.–Colombian relationship shifts from "Plan Colombia" to "Peace Colombia," the U.S. must ensure the successes of the former are not lost. For the United States, both the terms of the peace agreement and the way it is implemented are extremely important.

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1. Terry Miller and Anthony B. Kim, *2017 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2017), pp. 36–37, <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/argentina>.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

3. News release, "DHS Announces Chile's Designation Into the Visa Waiver Program," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, February 28, 2014, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/02/28/dhs-announces-chile%E2%80%99s-designation-visa-waiver-program> (accessed August 8, 2017).

4. Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Coca in the Andes," <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/ondcp/targeting-cocaine-at-the-source> (accessed August 8, 2017).

5. Ana Quintana, "The Colombian–FARC Peace Deal: Why It Failed, and How the U.S. Can Support a Responsible Renegotiation," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4617, October 24, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-colombian-farc-peace-deal-why-it-failed-and-how-the-us-can-support>.

6. News release, "ONDCP Releases Data on Cocaine Cultivation and Production in Colombia," Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President, March 14, 2017, <https://www.scribd.com/document/341880734/ONDCP-Data-on-Cocaine-Cultivation-and-Production-in-Colombia> (accessed August 8, 2017).

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- **Commit to supporting Colombia's efforts to locate and seize illicit FARC assets.** While the Colombian government has seized \$100 million from FARC this year, the location of FARC money and assets is still largely unknown.<sup>7</sup> Illicit money cannot remain in FARC control if the group intends on demobilizing and reintegrating into society.
- **Make the case that addressing the crisis in Venezuela requires addressing Cuba's leadership role in the Venezuelan government.** The Organization of American States Secretary General has described Cuba's presence in Venezuela as that of an "occupational army."<sup>8</sup> Cuba must be held accountable for its leadership role in Venezuela's demise.
- **Deepen trade relations with Argentina.** President Macri's leadership presents encouraging opportunities for the U.S. The Trump Administration should seek to reduce bilateral trade barriers. The U.S. should support Argentina's economic growth efforts.
- **Double down on efforts to support security and prosperity in Central America.** The Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Hon-

durans, and Guatemala are some of the most impoverished and dangerous countries in all Central America. This is largely the reason why they are also the primary source for unlawful migrants to the U.S. Addressing the security and economic crisis in Central America is a proven U.S. national security interest.

## Conclusion

Vice President Pence's visit to Central and South America is the ideal follow up to the Central America conference. While there are significant security and economic challenges in the region, the Trump Administration has a unique opportunity to capitalize on positive political dynamics. The Vice President's trip can support a deepening of important bilateral relations and help advance the Trump Administration's "America First" strategy.

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7. Alba Tobella, "FARC's Elusive Finances Undercut Support for Colombia Peace," *USA Today*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-13/farcs-elusive-finances-udercuts-support-for-colombia-peace> (accessed August 8, 2017).

8. Orlando Avendaño, "Cuba Has 'Occupying Army' in Venezuela, OAS Secretary General Claims," *PanAm Post*, July 20, 2017, <https://panampost.com/orlando-avendano/2017/07/20/cuba-has-occupying-army-in-venezuela/> (accessed August 8, 2017).