

# Steps the U.S. Must Take to Secure Peace in Colombia

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Colombia is one of Latin America's greatest success stories, an economic powerhouse and a regional model of U.S. engagement paving the way for a strategic alliance.

Colombia's recently negotiated peace deal is the ideal approach to address its long-standing conflict. The U.S. should support this win-win for both nations.

The stakes are high in Colombia. The U.S. must work with Bogota to tackle shared challenges, such as the Venezuela crisis and China's growing regional influence.

Colombia is a pillar of stability in South America and one of the U.S.'s most steadfast allies in the region. Today, the country finds itself at a challenging point in its history. A slow implementation of the FARC peace accords and dissident FARC combatants threaten the fragile reconciliation. Venezuela's crisis, the unstable regime in Caracas, and human exodus from Venezuela is straining Colombian resources. Historically high levels of cocaine production are undermining U.S.–Colombian efforts at combatting the illicit drug trade.

In the 1990s, Colombia was on the brink of being a failed state. Today, it has become a regional security leader and economic powerhouse. Colombia is one of Latin America's greatest success stories and a regional model of U.S. engagement paving the way for a strategic alliance.

The U.S. should support a responsible implementation of the peace process. It should have robust

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3469>

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TEXT BOX 1

## Index of Acronyms and Abbreviations

**FARC:** Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (Spanish: Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común). Demobilized Colombian guerilla group turned political party.

**FARC-EP:** Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombians (Spanish: Fuerza Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo). U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

policy to deal with the increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production. Congress must provide needed funds for narcotic interdictions along high growth and trafficking areas. FARC must be kept as a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization—and extradition must continue as a law enforcement tool. U.S. officials should also cooperate with their Colombian counterparts to deal with emerging threats from Chinese state enterprises like Huawei that could impede bilateral cooperation.

## Colombia: Then and Now

Colombia has come a long way over the past few decades. In the 1990s, it was on the precipice of becoming a failed state. Colombia was ravaged from drug-fueled violence that threatened the stability of the government. Today, Colombia is a regional leader and international security exporter. The success of Colombia is largely due to Colombian investments and U.S. support via Plan Colombia, a nearly two-decade economic and security assistance package totaling upwards of \$11 billion.<sup>1</sup>

Important to note, the Colombian government contributed the other 95 percent of these funds.<sup>2</sup> The U.S.–Colombia relationship is a clear example in which the U.S. has reaped an outsized return on its investment. Colombia now trains security forces from Central America, the Caribbean, and beyond; participates in U.N. peacekeeping missions; supports U.S. efforts in multilateral institutions; and is Latin America’s only NATO global partner. U.S. investments have created a partner capable of offsetting U.S. interests in the region.

Despite these successes, the enduring challenge of illicit cocaine production, increased coca cultivation, and insecurity in Colombia remains unresolved. This is now occurring in the context of new problems. Venezuela is imploding right on Colombia’s doorstep, and the humanitarian

and economic crisis has created Latin America's worst-ever migration crisis. Nearly 2 million Venezuelans have relocated to Colombia over the past four years.<sup>3</sup> The illegitimate regime in Caracas openly collaborates with regional criminal and terrorist groups, undermining Colombia's security.

## The Enduring Challenge of Cocaine Production

Despite significant anti-narcotics efforts, Colombia is once again the world's largest producer of cocaine and remains the source of over 90 percent of cocaine seized in the U.S. From 2012–2017, coca cultivation—the primary crop used to produce cocaine—steadily increased from 78,000 hectares to 209,000.<sup>4</sup> In tandem, the production potential from these crops has increased as well, from 210 metric tons in 2012 to 900 metric tons in 2017.<sup>5</sup> The following year saw a marginal decrease for the first time since 2012, to 208,000 hectares and 887 metric tons, but these figures are still alarming.<sup>6</sup> Various issues contributed to this increase.

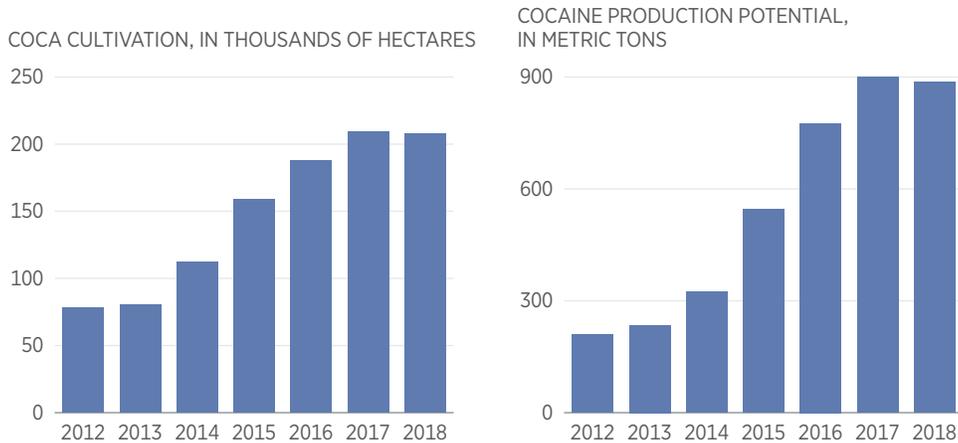
Policies adopted during the peace process negotiations directly contributed to the current increased production levels. Despite objections from the Colombian Minister of Defense and other Colombian security officials in 2015, the Colombian government chose to end U.S. aerial eradication and other offensive counternarcotics programs. The then-Minister of Health based his decision on a scientifically baseless World Health Organization (WHO) report that the herbicide used to eradicate coca crops, glyphosate, is “possibly carcinogenic to humans.”<sup>7</sup> The following year, the WHO released another report saying the herbicide is “unlikely” to cause cancer.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. government officials rejected the WHO report and the Colombian government's decision, stating that in the more than 20 years the U.S. has used aerial eradication in Colombia “[t]here is not one single verified case... of cancer being caused by glyphosate.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, coca growers were told of upcoming programs that would pay farmers for substituting coca for other crops. This reportedly created a perverse incentive for coca farmers to grow coca crops in exchange for government subsidies. The U.S. and Colombia have committed to expanding cooperation to cut coca cultivation in half by 2023.

The U.S. has a deep and long-term interest in supporting Colombia's efforts against the illicit cocaine industry. Trafficking and abuse of cocaine in the U.S. remains a major threat. Over the past few years, increased Colombian cocaine production has directly translated into “domestic abuse indicators”<sup>10</sup> in the U.S., e.g., cocaine-involved overdose deaths, cocaine

CHART 1

## Tracking Colombia's Cocaine Spike



**SOURCE:** White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy, "ONDCP Reports Cocaine Production in Colombia Is Leveling Off," June 26, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/ondcp-reports-cocaine-production-colombia-leveling-off/> (accessed December 2, 2019).

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initiates, and an exponential increase in export quality cocaine.<sup>11</sup> In looking for solutions to Colombia's cocaine problem, U.S. policymakers must understand this is a long-term project. In order for the country to overcome its cocaine problem, there are deep and enduring problems to address. Many of these issues led and prolonged its 50-plus year internal conflict.

Now that Colombia and former FARC-EP guerillas are implementing a peace agreement they negotiated to end the conflict, components of the deal support combating the proliferation of cocaine production, primarily the chapters on the solution to the illicit drug problem and comprehensive rural reform. The U.S. should continue to support Colombia's eradication efforts and newly developed crop-substitution programs.

This *Backgrounder* will further detail crop substitution as it relates to U.S. support for Colombia's peace process efforts. Colombia should also continue to scale-up interdiction capabilities in river areas and along the Pacific coast, the region where the majority of U.S.-bound narcotics depart from.<sup>12</sup> To supplement these efforts the U.S. should devote additional resources, where possible, to Colombia's land-formalization process. With secure land titles, less than 25 percent of farmers go back to farming coca. In comparison, over 75 percent of informal farmers without secure titles return to the coca trade. The U.S. supported a land-formalization pilot program in the town

CHART 2

## U.S. Deaths from Cocaine Overdoses

Year	Deaths	Population	Death rate per 100,000
2012	4,404	313,914,040	1.40
2013	4,944	316,128,839	1.56
2014	5,415	318,857,056	1.70
2015	6,784	321,418,820	2.11
2016	10,375	323,127,513	3.21
2017	13,942	325,719,178	4.28

**SOURCE:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About Multiple Causes of Death, 1999–2017,” <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html> (accessed January 13, 2020).

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of Ovejas and should seek opportunities to expand where legally feasible.<sup>13</sup> Given that FARC-EP is still a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. government and that they are participants of the peace process, the U.S. will naturally be limited in providing assistance.

## Timely, Responsible Implementation of Colombia’s Peace Agreement

While Colombia is dealing with surging cocaine production, it is also facing the daunting task of implementing the negotiated peace agreement with the FARC-EP. In 2016, the Colombian government and FARC-EP guerillas signed a landmark peace agreement to end more than 50 years of internal armed conflict. The final agreement was the result of a four-year peace process by the administration of then-President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC-EP negotiators. Arguably, the conditions for peace negotiations were created by the previous administration of President Alvaro Uribe, whose “Democratic Security Policy” significantly degraded the military capabilities of FARC-EP.<sup>14</sup>

Within Colombia, the peace agreement is a polarizing topic. Colombian voters initially rejected the peace agreement in October 2016 by a thin margin of 50.21 percent to 49.78 percent.<sup>15</sup> Opponents of the agreement perceived it as too lenient towards the FARC-EP, since it contained possibilities of amnesty for crimes like drug trafficking.<sup>16</sup> The Santos Administration and FARC-EP negotiators slightly altered the agreement, and the Senate

and House of Representatives approved the updated version the following month. At the time, President Santos' center-left ruling party coalition controlled both houses of Congress.

Accomplishing this peace agreement was a major milestone for Colombia. It ended more than 50 years of conflict and began the process of building peace in a country torn apart by violence and crime. Colombia's conflict was never going to end from just a traditional military-centric approach; the government had to address the underlying economic, social, and political factors that drove the insurgency.

Colombia now faces the daunting task of implementing this broad-based peace agreement and addressing the damage caused during the conflict. As of 2018, Colombia's conflict had killed over one-quarter million Colombians. It has also displaced over 7 million people,<sup>17</sup> nearly 15 percent of the country's population, creating the world's highest number of internally displaced people (IDP).<sup>18</sup> A majority of IDP are women and children who have been disproportionately affected by the conflict. Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory alleges that armed groups forcibly recruited almost 17,000 children during the conflict.<sup>19</sup> Women and children in the FARC-EP were sexually assaulted, and it was FARC-EP policy to have forced abortions and forced sterilization.<sup>20</sup> Colombia is a deeply wounded country.

## Colombian Government's Implementation of the Peace Agreement

As of late 2019, the implementation of the peace deal has been moving along at a slow but deliberate pace. The government and FARC-EP have made positive gains in disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former guerillas, as well as involving the demobilized in the political process under their new political party, Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (FARC). It is also positive that over 90 percent of the roughly 13,000 demobilized FARC remain participating members of the peace process.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the Colombian government is criticized for attempting to amend certain aspects of the peace agreement. The current President of Colombia, Ivan Duque, has been rightfully critical of loopholes within the peace agreement that have allowed FARC-EP criminals to escape justice. The controversial case of Jesus Santrich, a former FARC congressman turned dissident, who evaded a U.S. extradition order because of rights guaranteed by the peace agreement, demonstrates that loopholes in the accord undermine both U.S. and Colombian interests.

Concerns exist over the Colombian government's mishandling of the coca-crop substitution program and land-titling registry. According to a 2018 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report, the Colombian government is not fully complying with its coca-crop substitution commitments under the peace agreement. The report found that out of 99,097 families enrolled in the program, 89,796 have not received full payment, and 41,910 have not been paid at all.<sup>22</sup> The lack of support by the Colombian government is concerning considering the high coca cultivation rates.

At this current rate, Colombia and the U.S. will not meet their goal to halve cultivation by 2023. The program destroyed 34,767 hectares of coca crops, 94 percent of them voluntarily. In total, only 0.6 percent of the eradicated crops were replanted. At present, the replanting numbers are low—but without other crops to replace the income generated from coca cultivation, the numbers are poised to increase. Coca growing proliferated in the rural regions because of the minimal state presence. Associated violence and criminality stifled legal forms of economic development. Considering that the coca economy remains a key part of the economy in many parts of the country, crop substitution must be prioritized.

Inadequate state resources have also slowed another aspect of the peace agreement, the land-titling process. An estimated 15 percent of Colombia's land is unregistered or illegally owned.<sup>23</sup> During the conflict, drug traffickers and other criminal organizations stole land and forcibly displaced Colombians. The lack of state presence in these regions allowed these groups to establish strongholds. The Colombian government, along with U.S. and other international donors, are supporting Colombia's land-formalization process.<sup>24</sup> Yet despite the peace agreement, a new form of violence is occurring that continues to displace Colombians and is slowing down the implementation of the peace agreement. With a largely demobilized FARC-EP, other criminal groups and dissident FARC members are jockeying for territory. The Colombian government has been slow to fill the security void. As a result, in 2018, the countrywide homicide rate increased for the first time in a decade. Over 50 percent of the homicides were attributed to criminal groups fighting amongst one another.

Demobilized FARC and civil society leaders are also falling victim to the security crisis. Either FARC-EP dissidents, other armed groups, or criminals have killed an estimated 137 demobilized FARC since the agreement was signed.<sup>25</sup> An October 2019 statement from Colombia's Ombudsman's Office reported 58 cases of mass displacement that year, leaving 15,140 displaced.<sup>26</sup>

The security vacuum created by FARC-EP guerrillas, which the Colombian state has left unfilled, poses a considerable specific risk for the implementation

of the peace deal—and for Colombia’s security more broadly. As these criminal organizations and armed groups create new alliances and feuds, they will bring destabilizing violence. The FARC-EP left behind a lucrative drug trade, extortion racket, and other illicit moneymaking schemes. These groups are prevalent in rural areas and along border regions, particularly along the smuggling zones of the Colombia–Venezuela border. The rapid influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees into Colombia could potentially increase the numbers of criminal actors drawn into these organizations.

In August 2019, a small group of demobilized FARC-EP commanders, including their former spokesperson, announced a return to arms against the Colombian state.<sup>27</sup> Three of the guerrillas were key figures during the peace talks, including FARC Congressman Jesus Santrich, who recently evaded U.S. extradition for conspiring to ship 10 tons of cocaine to the U.S. FARC leadership in the political party has rejected rearmament, and, to date, over 90 percent of the roughly 13,000 demobilized guerrillas remain accredited members of the peace process.<sup>28</sup> With such high numbers of demobilized guerrillas deeply involved in the peace process, there is a very low likelihood they will join this splinter group. There is also a low likelihood of cohesive force being formed amongst the current dissidents. They are spread throughout the country, range widely on the ideological spectrum, and engage in different criminal activities. Low-level violence will probably occur as factions with rivalries confront one another.

## Shortcomings and Areas of Concern for U.S. Policymakers

A negotiated peace deal was the ideal approach to address Colombia’s long-standing conflict. In some ways, Colombia is already benefiting from the peace process. The conflict is over, the guerrillas have demobilized, and they are in the process of reintegrating into society. Yet lingering security challenges and the slow implementation of certain aspects of the peace deal threaten the long-term prospects of peace. A serious component of this involves the Colombian government implementing confidence-building measures with the people.

Overall, U.S. policymakers should support the peace agreement and recognize this as a win-win for both Colombia and the U.S. Colombia has stopped being an active warzone, and the Colombian government is no longer confronting the FARC-EP on the battlefield. The government can now focus on rebuilding after 50 years of conflict. Notwithstanding, U.S. policymakers should be mindful that portions of the agreement conflict with U.S. interests.

On one end, loopholes within the transitional justice system have allowed wanted FARC-EP criminals to escape from the U.S. justice system. In May of 2019, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) court of the transitional justice system blocked the U.S.'s extradition request for senior FARC commander Jesus Santrich, who was wanted for narcotics trafficking. At the time, he was detained in Colombia on charges alleging he conspired to smuggle 10 tons of cocaine into the U.S. during June 2017 to April 2018, *after* the signing of the peace agreement.

Despite U.S. authorities providing audio files to the JEP confirming Santrich's role in the conspiracy, the court ordered Santrich's release from custody. Upon his release, he was appointed to one of FARC's congressional seats, thus granting him limited immunity from arrest and prosecution.<sup>29</sup> Recently, he joined a dissident faction of former FARC combatants that has vowed to resume the armed struggle against the Colombian state.

The conduct of the JEP in this case should raise concerns for U.S. and Colombian policymakers. The JEP was created to rule on crimes conducted *before* the signing of the peace agreement. The court has now unilaterally decided it has the competence to decide over crimes committed *after* the peace agreement—including those involving criminals with U.S. extradition orders. This means a key U.S. law enforcement tool has been severely blunted in Colombia.

U.S. officials should be also concerned that FARC was not required to turn over their assets prior to signing the peace agreement. This remains an issue as the Colombian government continues finding undeclared, illicit FARC-EP money and properties throughout the country. Following the signing of the peace agreement, FARC-EP turned over what they claimed was the entirety of their money and properties, which totaled in value of \$324 million.<sup>30</sup> This number was a sharp deviation from the \$580 million in annual income FARC-EP was projected to have earned throughout 50-plus years. The insurgency naturally had expenses but earned a substantial income from drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, and illicit mining activities. Colombian government reports in 2012 estimated the FARC-EP could have earned from \$2.4 billion to \$3.5 billion from the drug trade alone.<sup>31</sup> Even with the obvious gap between suspected and declared illicit assets, FARC-EP was permitted to become a political party. Colombia, like other countries in Latin America, has a sordid history with narco and criminal actors financing politics.<sup>32</sup>

Since the signing of the peace agreement, Colombian authorities have continued finding undeclared assets—so far totaling nearly \$800 million.<sup>33</sup> The government has seized bank accounts and properties in Colombia that

TEXT BOX 2

## Shortfalls in Colombia's Anti-Money-Laundering Capabilities

In 2018, the International Monetary Fund released a detailed risk assessment on Colombia's "Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism" capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Key findings from the report indicated that:

- Colombian "authorities have difficulty obtaining accurate and up-to-date information on the beneficial ownership of complex corporate structures and when there is foreign ownership or control involved."<sup>2</sup>
- Financial institutions and designated non-financial businesses and professions are not required to freeze the assets of funds of designated persons.<sup>3</sup>
- In respect to cross-border correspondent banking, Colombian regulators do not have "specific requirements to determine the reputation of the respondent institution and the quality of supervision."<sup>4</sup>
- "There are no prohibitions to enter or continue banking relationships with shell banks, only to have procedures to verify that a respondent is not a shell bank, AND to verify that the respondent bank complies with KYC (know your customer) obligations."<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the risk assessment found Colombian authorities understand its domestic money-laundering and terrorist-financing risks—but its investigative and prosecutorial actions remain inadequate.

1. International Monetary Fund, Colombia Financial Sector Assessment Program, *Detailed Assessment Report on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism*, IMF Country Report No. 18/314, November 2018, and World Bank, Gross Domestic Product Colombia, Data Series 1960–2017.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
5. *Ibid.*

were part of money-laundering fronts for demobilized FARC-EP members. Sizeable hurdles remain in seizing the remainder of FARC's illicit assets, mainly because they are located outside Colombia. Colombia's attorney general's office has traced FARC assets to Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Venezuela, and even to European countries like Denmark, Germany, Holland, Norway, and Sweden.<sup>34</sup>

Absent reforms and stronger efforts, pursuing illicit FARC assets and combatting illicit financing from criminal organizations domestically and abroad will remain a significant challenge for Colombia. A 2017 Colombian government report estimated that money laundered in Colombia was the equivalent of 5.4 percent of the country's \$311.78 billion gross domestic product.<sup>35</sup>

## FARC-EP: A Foreign Terrorist Organization?

The FARC demobilized is now a political party in Colombia. Therefore U.S. policymakers must consider whether FARC-EP's designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) is still applicable. FARC-EP was designated an FTO in 1997 under the Immigration and National Act (INA). Under the INA, the Secretary of State must certify that the group in question meet the following criteria:

- Be a foreign organization;
- Engage in or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorism; and
- Threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests of the United States.<sup>36</sup>

Even though the majority of FARC-EP guerrillas are in the process of demobilizing and reintegrating into society, more than 1,000 FARC dissidents continue to engage in illicit behavior, which warrants maintaining the group's designation. In 2019, dissidents kidnapped and killed journalists in Ecuador and Colombia.<sup>37</sup> They have also kidnapped a Colombian soldier, killed miners interfering with their illicit mining activities,<sup>38</sup> and continue destabilizing the country with drug trafficking. Based upon the INA criteria that put the group on the list, they cannot justifiably be removed.

Colombian government and demobilized guerrillas are in the early stages of normalizing relations after a long-standing conflict. From a practical perspective, the U.S. must wait and see how this process unfolds.

## The Impact of Venezuela Crisis and Maduro's Destabilization Strategy

No country is experiencing the brunt of the Venezuela crisis more than Colombia. To date, Colombia has taken in 1.9 million Venezuelan refugees, migrants, and Colombian returnees—out of the over 4 million Venezuelans who have fled.<sup>39</sup> This number does not include the tens of thousands of Venezuelans who transit through Colombia en route to other countries or those who enter Colombia for commercial goods and return home.

The Organization of American States (OAS) predicts the total Venezuela exodus could increase to 7.5 million to 8.2 million persons by 2020.<sup>40</sup> The Colombian government has provided for the refugees with little assistance from the international community. The same OAS report finds that for Syrian refugees, multilateral organizations allocated \$5,000 per person. For Venezuelans, less than \$300 has been given. Considering that Venezuela is an international crisis, multilateral institutions must support Colombia's efforts.

The illegitimate regime in Caracas continues to undermine the security and stability of their counterparts in Bogotá. High-level Venezuelan officials are directly involved in narco-trafficking and illegal mining alongside Colombian cartels and criminal organizations. Under the late Hugo Chávez, and continuing under Maduro, Venezuela supports Colombia's terrorists and guerrilla groups by providing them with safe haven from the Colombian government. These groups have been present in Venezuela since the 2000s. Maduro's recently defected intelligence chief revealed that Colombian drug cartels and criminal gangs operate in Venezuela with Maduro's knowledge.<sup>41</sup> For Maduro, the relationship with these guerrilla groups gives Venezuela leverage over Colombia.

The Colombian government also alleges that Maduro is fomenting social unrest in Colombia. Recently, Colombia deported 59 Venezuelans for acts of violence and acts of vandalism during protests.<sup>42</sup> During protests in late November 2019, Colombians were largely protesting peacefully, but there were pockets of violent protesters. Colombia's Interior Minister also claims Venezuelans have promoted violence on social media and infiltrate the protests in order to incite further violence.<sup>43</sup> The regime in Caracas is up against the ropes, and the administration of President Duque is a staunch advocate for Maduro to step down.

There is merit behind the Colombian government's allegations. Venezuela and their allies in Havana and Moscow are experienced in destabilizing their adversaries' political systems. The President of Chile has made similar accusations against Maduro, claiming that Venezuelans infiltrated Chilean protests and instigated violence. U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State Michael Kozak said the U.S. government has identified false social media accounts from Russia pretending to be Chileans attempting to undermine Chilean democracy and institutions.<sup>44</sup> Under Chile's current President, Sebastián Piñera, the country has played an outsized role in promoting a democratic transition in Venezuela.

Relations between Colombia and Venezuela are tense, and diplomatic relations were severed in February 2019, when international aid destined



**SOURCES:** Organization of American States, “Preliminary Report on the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis in the Region,” March 8, 2019, <http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Preliminary-Report-2019-on-Venezuelan-Migrant-and-Refugee-Crisis-in-the-Region.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2019); Migration Policy Institute, “Creativity amid Crisis: Legal Pathways for Venezuelan Migrants in Latin America,” January, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/legal-pathways-venezuelan-migrants-latin-america> (accessed May 15, 2019); and author’s field research in Colombia.

for Venezuela’s Interim President Juan Guaido attempted to enter Venezuela from Colombia.<sup>45</sup> On various occasions, Maduro has also warned Colombia of a military invasion and has conducted training exercises along their shared border.<sup>46</sup>

With Colombian guerrilla groups hiding in Venezuela seeking to attack Colombia as well as these military exercises, there is a rising threat of a Venezuela–Colombia conflict. While there is a low likelihood of Venezuela

directly confronting their better-equipped Colombian counterparts, the involvement of guerrillas increases the threat of a miscalculation.

## Colombia's China Dilemma: Balancing Investment Needs and China's Corrupting Influence

As in many other countries in Latin America, China's presence is also increasing in Colombia. China is now Colombia's second-largest trading partner with two-way trade valued at \$14.6 billion in 2018.<sup>47</sup> While the U.S. remains Colombia's top trading partner, with two-way trade valued at \$36.4 billion in 2017,<sup>48</sup> China is making a strong push to deepen ties with Colombia, including wanting them to sign onto the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Colombian officials have publicly expressed skepticism over the BRI and corruption linked to Chinese development finance projects, yet their recent actions are not aligned with their public statements.<sup>49</sup> While Colombia has not signed onto the BRI, Colombia's need for infrastructure and technology presents a vulnerability that Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private-sector companies could exploit to support Beijing's foreign policy.<sup>50</sup>

Recent events in Colombia merit a deeper discussion by U.S. policymakers with their Colombian counterparts on the implications of China's activities in Colombia. In October 2019, the Colombian government awarded a contract to build Bogotá's metro to a Chinese consortium, APCA Transmimetro. The consortium consists of two Chinese SOEs, China Harbour Engineering Company Limited (CHEC) and Xi'an Metro Company Limited. CHEC, which controls 85 percent of the consortium, is a subsidiary of the Chinese state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). CCCC has a long trail of corruption and fraudulent infrastructure projects and was banned for eight years from the World Bank for fraudulent practices. In fact, all Chinese companies are legally required to "support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts."<sup>51</sup>

China will remain a significant trade partner for Colombia, and it is up to Colombia to manage that relationship in a responsible and pragmatic manner. When managed wisely, China can help catalyze needed investments and economic development.

Colombian government officials must be mindful that China's engagement will, to varying degrees, facilitate undemocratic activities, given that undermining the U.S.'s attempts of promoting democracy is a foreign policy in Beijing.<sup>52</sup> The U.S. should not ask Colombia to disengage from China but rather should encourage them to ask China to operate by a set of democratic standards.

Agreements with China must have high levels of transparency, responsible debt and lending practices, respect for the rule of law, and respect for sovereignty. Colombia should have a clear-eyed view of the potential costs and consequences of irresponsible engagement with China. Colombia must also factor in national security concerns for strategic industries like energy and telecommunications. Huawei is currently the second-largest mobile phone provider in Colombia and could potentially control “50 percent of the global 5G market.”<sup>53</sup> Given the deep security and intelligence relationship between the U.S. and Colombia, the U.S. and Colombia both have a shared interest in maintaining the integrity of their telecommunications networks.

## The Way Forward

The stakes are high in Colombia and the U.S. must work with our partner to tackle these shared challenges. In order to create the conditions for a long-term peace, the U.S. should:

- **Maintain the bipartisan consensus on U.S.–Colombia relations that has underpinned bilateral relations in both capitals.** The Colombia success story is rooted in the shared belief that Colombia’s security and prosperity is a U.S. national security imperative. U.S. policymakers from both parties must not lose sight of the importance of the strategic relationship and should avoid politicizing relations.
- **Allocate appropriate development, security, and civil society funding to Colombia.** The White House’s fiscal year 2018 budget reduced funding for Colombia from \$391 million to \$250 million. Foreign assistance should align with foreign policy objectives, and these reductions will undermine the Trump Administration’s efforts at combatting the domestic and international illicit drug trade. With Colombia, the U.S. receives an outsized return on its investment in the form of a like-minded and capable partner.
- **Increase U.S. Agency for International Development funding for the land-formalization and titling process.** In order to bring legal and sustainable development to the rural regions and reduce the number of coca farmers, the U.S. should scale up support for Colombia’s land-registry process. Farmers with legal titles over their lands are more than 50 percent less likely to return to coca farming.<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, property rights provide confidence for the private sector, thus reducing the need for long-term assistance.

- **Devote necessary interdiction assets to the Pacific region and high coca growth riverine areas.** Congressional appropriators must work the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement and their counterparts at U.S. Southern Command to determine what asset shortfalls have undermined their interdiction capabilities.
- **Meaningfully expand the Women's Global Development and Prosperity (W-GDP) initiative in Colombia.** The Trump Administration's W-GDP initiative underscores the critical role women play in spurring economic growth in developing countries. Congress and the Administration should develop a coordinated plan to advance this program in Colombia.
- **Call on international donors to increase support to Colombia for the Venezuelan migration crisis.** Colombia has received the largest number of Venezuelan migrants, and that trend will continue. International funding for Venezuelan migrants is minimal in comparison to similar migrant crises. The absence of sufficient international financing for national and regional recipient countries is weighing heavily on countries like Colombia, and multilateral institutions must be urged to act.
- **Maintain FARC-EP as a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization until they no longer meet the criteria.** Colombia and demobilized guerrillas have only begun the normalization process after a long-standing conflict. The U.S. should not weaken its standards and set an irresponsible precedent for the delisting of other terrorist organizations.
- **Pursue and seize FARC-EP's illicit assets.** FARC-EP guerrillas have not fully surrendered their illicit assets as obligated by the peace agreement. Not only could this offset a financial burden on the Colombian state, but this also raises questions as to what other illicit activities in which they may be involved. Congress should grant additional tools to U.S. law enforcement and the intelligence community to investigate and seize these illicit finances.

- **Work with Colombian counterparts to support security services adaption of next-generation technology that factors in national security concerns.** U.S. law enforcement, defense, and intelligence operating in Colombia should work with their counterparts to mitigate threats posed by Chinese networks. Should Colombia develop its 5G technology from untrusted companies like Huawei, the U.S. should be prepared to operate in this “zero trust” environment.<sup>55</sup>
- **Keep forward momentum on the bilateral relationship.** While Colombian leaders have made missteps, their overall commitment to combatting the illicit drug trade alongside the U.S. is unquestionable. Statements from Washington threatening to list Colombia (alongside narco-state Venezuela) as a country that fails to meet its international counternarcotics agreements is counterproductive.<sup>56</sup> Unless Colombia dramatically backslides in its antidrug efforts, the U.S. must not decertify it as a partner nation.

## Committing to Colombia’s Future

Colombia and the bilateral relationship with the U.S. serve as a model for the region today. Even with its current challenges, Colombia is a key pillar of stability and security in South America—as well as an economic leader. Colombia’s transformation over the past two decades is one of Latin America’s great success stories.

Yet the problems in the post-conflict era could cause the country to regress. The U.S. must remain dedicated to a strategic bilateral relationship. At the same time, the Colombian government must provide confidence-building measures at home and to the U.S. They must demonstrate their commitment to the peace plan and address the cocaine surge with clear and sustained actions.

With neighboring Venezuela’s crisis and Maduro’s destabilizing activities in Colombia, the U.S. must work with Colombia to solve these hemispheric challenges. Taking the long view amidst these crises, this is an opportunity for the U.S. and Colombia to lock in a sustainable path to peace.

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