

Colombia's Security Challenges, the Government Response, and the Future of U.S.-Colombia Relations

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Overview

From October 6 to 16, 2022, the author visited Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, to speak with government personnel, businesspersons, academics, and others regarding Colombia's security challenges, the Colombian response under the new government of Gustavo Petro, and the future of the U.S.-Colombia relationship. The general impression is that the "sky is not falling." Nonetheless, the combination of expanding challenges and the style and agenda of the Petro government may profoundly deepen reinforcing security and economic crises for the country, significantly impact the dynamic of the region, and force a fundamental—and likely painful—reorientation of the basis of Colombia's longstanding cooperation with the United States.

The word heard most frequently in the 26 individual interviews conducted in Colombia was "incertidumbre" (uncertainty). Many in the security sector have expressed concern and disillusionment due to President Petro's policies and other pronouncements, his actions to date, and his perceived orientation based on his past both as an M-19 guerilla and as mayor of Bogotá. The security professionals' concerns are nonetheless tempered by resignation, in deference to the fact that Petro was duly elected as president by the Colombians that they serve.

The other word most frequently heard was "caution." Many in the security sector perceive a shift in the tone and priorities of the new government; for example, many with whom the author spoke believe, for better or worse, that the leaders that President Petro has selected for the military and police place particular emphasis on the military doing no harm, over an emphasis

on securing results. While some security forces have indeed been involved in the commission of serious crimes and other errors, and while the new leadership certainly has not halted military and police operations against criminal groups, the net result of the perceived new environment has arguably been a chilling effect, with members of the security forces feeling a new imperative to avoid operations which could generate career-ending or criminally sanctionable errors, as well as avoiding public expression of any negative sentiments or concern.

During the interviews, multiple authorities offered unsolicited assurances regarding the subordination of the Colombian military to civilian authority. The frequency with which such comments occurred highlighted sensitivity within parts of the Colombian Armed Forces that many outside the country almost expect it to act in undemocratic ways in the context of the magnitude and direction of changes presented by President Petro.

Colombia is at a critical moment in the interplay between security and economic dynamics and government policies, with a nontrivial possibility that things could turn out unexpectedly well, but an arguably much greater probability that they will not. In an informal survey conducted among national security specialists during one of the presentations in Colombia, 8 out of 10 indicated that they did not expect the trajectory of events in the Petro administration to yield, on balance, positive results. The other two said that it was too early to tell.

The outcome of Colombia's dilemma arguably depends on the interaction between the corrupting and violence-producing activities of well-funded (if fragmented) criminal groups and the illicit activities that finance them; investment in and performance of Colombia's economy, weakened by Covid-19 and the inflationary effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and the effects of the security, economic, and international relations policies of the Petro government and the way they are perceived.

Illicit Activity

The principal illicit economies in Colombia affecting the United States and the region include the production of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana, as well as illegal mining, although groups operating in Colombia are also engaged in illicit activities that affect both the domestic and international economy in other ways.

Cocaine. Cocaine production in Colombia experienced **a dramatic surge during and in the years following the 2016 agreement** formally demobilizing the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), following several prior years of decline. This expanded production has been facilitated by the underfunding and implementation difficulties of crop substitution programs, as well as by the **cessation of aerial spraying**. The outgoing government of Iván Duque made a considerable effort to expand manual eradication of coca at considerable risk to the forces engaged in the activity, contributing to a modest reduction. Nonetheless, the number of acres under cultivation **increased by 43 percent** from 2020 to 2021, according to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) calculations, with the **204,000 hectares under cultivation that year** the greatest quantity the organization had ever recorded.

Beyond the increase in hectares under cultivation, **genetic modification** of coca plants and improvements in **growing techniques and production processes** has further increased the estimated overall quantity of cocaine produced in Colombia.

The majority of Colombian cocaine is smuggled to the United States, through a variety of Atlantic and Pacific maritime routes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of narcosubs, other low-observable watercraft, and towed buoys increased, due in part to the temporary closure of cross-border commerce that could be used to smuggle product. Venezuela also has increasingly become a transshipment point for cocaine produced in Colombia, although it has also been **becoming a source zone for coca** and developing laboratories for refining it into cocaine in its own right.

Marijuana. Although producing less overall revenue than cocaine, Colombia produces an important quantity of marijuana, principally **in the Cauca Valley**. This includes a **specialty version, “creepy,”** that has been relatively successful in penetrating regional markets.

Heroin. Colombia grows a relatively modest amount of poppies and transforms them into heroin, principally in the southwest Colombia departments of **Nariño and Cauca**. This relatively limited industry has traditionally been **populated by multiple, fairly small criminal organizations**, although in recent years some evidence suggests that the National Liberation Army (**ELN**) **may have sought to dominate the heroin trade in the area**.

Illegal Mining. Illegal mining operations in Colombia sometimes exceed drugs in the value of the illicit output produced. By one estimate, **64,000 hectares** of land in Colombia are dedicated to illegal mining, with **69 percent of all gold produced** in Colombia being illegal.

Most illegal mining operations in Colombia are concentrated in the mountainous department of Antioquia, as well as to the south in Choco. To a lesser degree, illegal mining also occurs in the mountains of the southwest of the country, where government presence is scarce.

Illegal mining for substances such as gold and coltan also occur in the lowlands in the southeast of the country in the Colombian Amazon, particularly **Amazonas province**, bordering Venezuela. The illegal mining region extends into Venezuela’s Orinoco River basin, where the ELN and other criminal groups conduct operations.

Human Trafficking. In recent years, with the economic collapse of neighboring Venezuela and the exodus of millions of Venezuelans through Colombia, there have been increasing problems of Venezuelans being recruited by illicit groups and exploited for forced labor, prostitution, and other activities. The **reopening of the already highly porous Colombia-Venezuela border** is likely to contribute to the problem, although also impacting the balance between groups involved.

Armed Groups

The armed criminal and insurgent groups operating at least partly in Colombia have become increasingly fragmented in recent years, in part reflecting accelerated operations against their leadership by the Colombian state at the end of the Duque administration. Colombia’s armed groups have also significantly evolved in their strength and territorial distribution, even if actions against some of the more established groups have not significantly diminished their overall strength.

FARC Dissidents. The FARC, once Colombia’s largest revolutionary group, was partially demobilized **through a negotiated agreement** with the government of Juan Manuel Santos in 2016. The majority of the group and its leadership formally agreed to the terms of the deal and moved its membership into

demobilization zones where they were registered, turned over arms, became eligible for special judicial treatment for crimes they had committed as combatants (the **Special Peace Jurisdiction or JEP**), and began a process of reincorporation into Colombian society.

A group of dissident FARC elements, however—concentrated in areas earning significant illicit income from narco trafficking and other illicit activities, particularly in Colombia’s southern and eastern border regions—**rejected the agreement and continued to fight**. These groups, including the 1st, 10th, 28th, and 33rd fronts, were loosely coordinated under **Gentil Duarte**, and they were protected by maintaining a substantial presence on the Venezuelan side of the border in states such as Apure, where they also conducted criminal operations. Their numbers were bolstered by an inflow of FARC members who had demobilized under the 2016 agreement but who had not been able to successfully reincorporate themselves into Colombian society. In 2019, they were joined by FARC leaders such as **Ivan Marquez and Jesus Santrich**, who had signed and demobilized under the 2016 agreement but became disillusioned with it (in part due to sanctions imposed on them over their continuing narco trafficking activities) and returned to the fight, calling themselves the **Second Marquetalia**.

Despite their return to the fight, the ranks of the FARC dissidents and Second Marquetalia were substantially weakened by the killing or capture of their key leaders during a combination of activities by Colombian security forces (accelerating at the end of the administration of Iván Duque in 2021–2022), complicated by infighting and possible betrayals among each other. Significant losses included the deaths of Second Marquetalia leader Jesus Santrich and the grave wounding of Ivan Marquez in **July 2022 in Apure**, the killing of FARC Dissident leader **Gentil Duarte in May 2022**, and attacks against other key FARC front leaders. The killing of Duarte’s successor—Ivan Mordisco, head of the 1st FARC front—in a military operation was **announced by the Colombian government**, with speculation that FARC spokesperson **Calcará was stepping into the breach**. In October 2022, however, Ivan Mordisco **emerged alive**, announcing his **interest in participating in the “total peace”** process of the Colombian government, along with **Calcará** and other individual FARC-D leaders.

Despite such diminished capacity, residual FARC dissident groups continued in a fragmented faction as important criminal actors in the frontier region with Venezuela in departments including Arauca and Norte de Santander, as well as in the south of Colombia in Putumayo and Amazonas (along Colombia’s border with Peru), where the **Carolina Ramirez front** has continued to have a presence.

Outreach to FARC dissident groups as part of the Petro government’s “total peace” initiative formally began in September 2022 with a meeting in Caquetá by Petro government peace commissioner **Danilo Rueda in September 2022**. Nonetheless, some interviewed for this work noted that the sheer number of individual FARC dissident groups without clear coordinating leadership, ambiguities over their primarily criminal versus ideological nature, and questions of whether to offer them the same terms as others (given that they initially rejected the peace process that other FARC members accepted) will make achieving an agreement complex.

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National Liberation Army (ELN). With the 2016 peace accords partially demobilizing the FARC, the once smaller and distinct ELN emerged as the most powerful armed group in Colombia, occupying an increasingly dominant position along Colombia's long border with Venezuela—particularly in Norte de Santander and Arauca, but extending into more southern departments as well.

By contrast to the FARC, the ELN is more decentralized in its structure, with doctrine and organization that is more rooted in Chinese Maoist guerilla thought than the Marxist-Leninist ideological basis of the FARC, but also nourished by liberation theology, which plays a role in its discourse, if not in guiding its criminal activities.

In 1973, through **Operation Anori**, the Colombian armed forces substantially displaced the ELN from its original area of Antioquia into the border region with Venezuela, principally Arauca, where in succeeding years they reconstituted themselves, bolstered by the ability to extort money from petroleum operations and the construction of a petroleum pipeline **by the German-based firm Mannesmann**.

With the 2016 demobilization of the FARC under the peace accords, the ELN was able to both move into territory abandoned by the FARC and to benefit from the recruitment of FARC combatants who did not wish to demobilize, and who saw the ELN partly as ideological brethren. In its contemporary operations, the ELN has also benefitted vis-à-vis other groups from its ability to integrate itself into the local population and leverage it for its intelligence, logistics, and other functions.

The ELN also significantly strengthened its presence on the Venezuelan side of the Colombia-Venezuela border, with the Maduro regime effectively **welcoming them as what it saw as a buffer** against any force that might attempt to enter Colombia to overthrow it.

For the Maduro regime in Venezuela, ELN presence was also useful in organizing criminal groups conducting illegal mining activities in the Orinoco mining arc, with a portion of the proceeds indirectly benefitting the Maduro regime and keeping the groups that kept it in power satisfied. The **ELN Northeast warfront leader Pablito**, whose organization benefitted substantially from the **revenues generated by illegal mining** and other illicit operations in Venezuela, **became notably powerful** within the decentralized “central command” structure of the organization (COCE).

In the complex infighting between criminal and ideological groups in the Venezuelan border region, the ELN arguably made significant progress in gaining the upper hand, benefitting from its own discipline and sources of illicit revenues in both Colombia and Venezuela, not to mention its convergence of interest with the Maduro regime on the Venezuelan side against groups such as the FARC dissidents, which had become troublesome to the regime. By September 2022, the ELN reportedly had a presence **in almost all of the states** on Venezuela's side of its border with Colombia.

In October 2022, the Petro government **initiated “peace talks”** with the ELN, including **Venezuela as a key mediator** and site of negotiations—effectively resuming a process started by the prior

government of Juan Manuel Santos and briefly continued by the government of Iván Duque, before the ELN's **January 2019 car bomb attack** against the school of cadets of the Colombian National Police put an end to that initiative.

In the new talks, although operations by and against the ELN **were still ongoing** at the time this went to press, the Colombian state agreed to suspend arrest and extradition orders against ELN leadership—including **COCE head Antonio Garcia**—to facilitate negotiations. According to those consulted for this work, COCE member Pablito, with his organization's substantial illicit money-generating operations in the Orinoco mining arc, was notably not present in the initial dialogues between the ELN and the government.

Gulf Clan/Urabeños. The Gulf Clan, previously known as the Urabeños, were the most powerful of the non-ideologically oriented criminal groups to emerge from a 2005 peace agreement to demobilize Colombian paramilitary forces. The group became one of the principal military objectives of the Colombian government under the leadership of the previous government of Iván Duque, with a series of significant actions against its leadership and structure, including the **October 2021 capture** of its leader, Dario Antonio Úsaga (“Otoniel”) in a major military operation **in Operation Agamemnon** and his subsequent **extradition to New York** in May. The action left his successor, **“Chiquito Malo,” in control** of fragmented organization, with some reported challenges to his leadership. In addition, the ELN and the Gulf Clan have engaged in a significant struggle for territory in the Venezuelan border region in areas such as Apure and **Bolívar state**, in which, by some accounts, the ELN has slowly gained the upper hand. According to those consulted for this report, the presence of the Urabeños in Putumayo has also been notably weakened.

Despite such setbacks, the Gulf Clan **continues to possess substantial military capability** and resources, if fragmented. It has also expressed **an interest in participating in the “total peace”** process which the Petro government has extended to non-ideological criminal groups, albeit possibly on terms distinct from those with which it is seeking to negotiate with the ELN and FARC dissidents.

Other armed groups (GAO). Beyond the Gulf Clan, multiple other armed criminally active groups (GAO) exist across Colombia—vying with each other, often through violence, for control of sources of criminal revenue including the narcotics trade, illicit mining, and human trafficking and other forms of smuggling at the border. They are nourished by their ability to **recruit desperate Venezuelans fleeing into Colombia**, who would otherwise be without means to cross the border or sustain themselves.

One of the most notable evolutions at the end of the Duque administration has been the substantial weakening of several once-dominant groups, including the **Rastrojos**, although the status of others such as the **Caparros is a subject of debate**.

Tren de Aragua. With the movement of millions of Venezuelans through Colombia, and an estimated **2.5 million remaining in the country**, the Venezuelan criminal gang Tren de Aragua has established a presence in Colombia, **including in the capital Bogotá**, as well as in other parts of the region subject to substantial Venezuelan migration. Its focus in the country has been human trafficking involving the exploitation of those migrants.

Economic, Social, and Fiscal Context

The Covid-19 pandemic not only had a profound health impact on the country, but Covid-19 related restrictions on public activity profoundly damaged the economy and the individual situations of Colombians, bankrupting many small businesses and pushing Colombians into the informal sector. Those stresses—including Colombian frustrations with the government response on top of prior frustrations with government performance, corruption insecurity, and other societal maladies—arguably brought Colombians to the breaking point of their tolerance. The protests that swept the country in 2021, and which exemplified the mood that led to the election of Gustavo Petro, arguably reflected that frustration and desire for something new.

Although the Colombian economy rebounded from a **7 percent contraction during the Covid-19 restrictions of 2020** with a **10.6 percent growth in 2021**, the society was left economically and politically transformed. The inflationary effects of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, particularly on the prices of items affecting the most vulnerable such as basic foodstuffs and petroleum products for transportation, heating, and cooking, made matters even worse, in the context of a government left by Covid-19 spending in a delicate fiscal position to protect the population against those effects. Overall Colombian inflation rates by September 2022 reached **11.44 percent**, while food prices **were up 26.62 percent** from the prior year.

General Direction of the Petro Administration

Gustavo Petro signaled from even before his inauguration his intention to take the country **in a significantly new direction**. That orientation was reflected in his discourse, his initial personnel selections, and to a lesser extent his policy actions.

To a degree, what President Petro has done to date has lagged behind what he has indicated he will do, reflecting not only the inherent need for time to implement his programs but some difficulties in moving from concept to execution. There has also been pushback from both within and beyond his government by those who see complications and undesirable effects in turning the ideas he has expressed into concrete government actions.

In general terms, President Petro is a seasoned politician, having served many years in the Colombian Congress as well as been the **mayor of Bogotá**. He possesses a notable ability to inspire his followers with his vision for change, although critics would argue that he has shown less skill in his political career in translating that vision into successful programs. For many consulted for this work, Petro’s difficulty in establishing a public garbage collection service during his time as mayor of Bogotá, with **trash piling up for weeks** in the streets due to deficiencies in the implementation of the program, was a key example of the discrepancy between his discourse and policy implementation abilities. In the words of one senior former Colombian official consulted for this work, the president is “very good at ending things, but not constructing them.”¹

Some interviewed for this work viewed as a possible saving grace the gap between Petro’s rhetoric and what he is able to implement, which could act as a moderating force on the extent to which he

1 Interview with senior former Colombian official, Bogotá, Colombia, October 2022.

will radically change the direction of Colombia. From the beginning of his term, President Petro has suffered from a level of disorder within his own government, frequently being contradicted by, or having to correct statements by, his own ministers.

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Those consulted for this work noted that during his time as Bogotá mayor, multiple close friends and colleagues that he appointed to his team found it difficult to work with him, and resigned, including **Antonio Navarro** and **Daniel Garcia-Peña**—suggesting that Petro may face similar turnover in his national-level governing team in the coming months. Although in the first two months of his administration, he has not yet had to fire or accept the resignation of a minister, he has publicly spoken of “**enemies within**” **his own government and cabinet**.

The president has also been regularly absent or delayed in attending key events, including an important ceremony for the Armed Forces, cabinet meetings, and an important congress of **business leaders in Cartagena**. Some consulted for this work speculated that the president’s personal effectiveness may be impeded by drug and alcohol use or other issues.

Whatever the president’s difficulties in managing his own government in fulfillment of his agenda, he currently has relatively effective support for his programs in Colombia’s Congress. While his own “historic pact” does not have an absolute majority in the body, Colombia’s March 2022 elections gave a **decisive advantage to left-oriented** parties amenable to the president’s agenda. Thus far, the pragmatic and capable head of Congress, **Roy Barreras**, has been able to advance the president’s initiatives, beginning with tax reforms, although not without **street protests** over their potential impact. As a complicating factor, however, Barreras’ beginning of debilitating **medical treatments for colon cancer** may inhibit his effectiveness in shepherding Petro’s agenda through the legislature in the coming months.

The Petro National Security Team

From the beginning, President Petro put in leadership positions a combination of persons of confidence, persons aligned with his policy agenda, and figures from the prior less-right-oriented governments of Juan Manuel Santos and Andres Pastrana.

Intelligence Positions. President Petro grabbed some attention by **selecting former M-19 guerilla colleagues** to lead each of the three organizations born out of the prior dismantling of Colombia’s **Administrative Security Department (DAS)**. He named **Manuel Alberto Casanova** to the National Intelligence Directorate (DNI), **Augusto Rodríguez** to Colombia’s Secret Service the **National Protection Organization (UNP)**, and **Carlos Fernando García** to the National Immigration Service.

The Ministry of Defense. To head Colombia’s military, President Petro named Iván Velázquez, a former Colombian Supreme Court judge with a history of prosecuting security forces for human rights

abuses. According to those consulted for this work, Petro notably did not extend the invitation to Velasquez personally, but at the recommendation of, and through, an aide—leading to some concern by Velásquez about whether he would have adequate support from the president to implement the reforms and oversee the budget reductions within the military that he might be called upon to do. Indeed, Velasquez has publicly indicated the **military would need more money, not less**, if it is to transform itself and conduct the range of associated activities it may be called upon to support the president’s plan of “total peace.”

Within the Defense Ministry, Velásquez has proceeded gradually in replacing senior personnel with his own personal preferences, and as of October 2022, he had replaced all vice ministers (tier 2 personnel) and approximately half of the director-level personnel (tier 3). Despite having his preferred persons in key positions, some consulted for this work believed that Velásquez’ lack of experience with an organization as big as the Colombian Ministry of Defense could present challenges for him to maintain adequate awareness over the organization and effectively implement his agenda within it.

Colombian Armed Services. Within the uniformed armed services, President Petro obliged some **52 senior military and police officers into retirement** in order to reach the officers that he desired for positions of leadership. Key qualifications included an **absence of complaints of human right violations or other wrongdoing**, let alone substantiated cases or actual convictions. While the leaders ultimately selected generally have some command experience heading operationally focused organizations, the selection criteria tended to de-emphasize those whose careers had focused on operations, which inherently increases the probability of accusations, even if the official involved has actually committed no wrong.

President Petro’s selection process for the new military leadership produced an unprecedented concentration of persons occupying senior uniformed military positions with significant **administrative**, legal, or academic backgrounds. These included the new head of the Armed Forces **Helder Fernan Giraldo** and new Army head **General Luis Mauricio Ospina Gutiérrez**, both of whom, aside from respectable commands over operational units, had also previously commanded Colombia’s strategic level war college.

An inadvertent effect of large number of retirements of senior officers, according to numerous persons consulted for this work, was the loss of a significant experience and the ascension of lower-ranking officers into higher-level leadership positions. Correspondingly, some achieved their new positions not having completed the courses and other criteria normally required of them. While those officers were not necessarily unqualified for the positions, many lacked the level of experience that others previously occupying those posts had.

Although those passing into retirement included many Colombian officers who had worked closely with the United States, the change in senior leadership arguably did not, in itself, profoundly impact the deep and longstanding web of relationships between U.S. and Colombian armed forces. This was in part due to the breadth of U.S. engagement over the years with Colombian personnel in professional military education (PME), training, and other military outreach activities. It also reflected the U.S. policy of **vetting those it trains** to ensure an absence of credible accusations of human rights violations. Thus Petro’s focus on putting into place leaders without even accusations of possible past

wrongdoing meant that many in the new generation of leadership had worked with, or been trained in, the United States in the past.

Security Policies

Key Petro policy directions relevant to Colombia's security arena include his previously noted desire to reach a "total peace" with all armed groups in the country, leading with not only negotiations but also the initial suspension of extraditions **and operations against** group leaders if they cease attacks against the Colombian government, the people, and public infrastructure. Related initiatives include Petro's reorientation of Colombia's counternarcotics efforts, including suspending the eradication of small-scale coca producers to concentrate more on efforts against interdiction and money laundering; legalizing marijuana and possibly other narcotics; transforming the Colombian military and police into an **"army of peace"** (including the eventual relocation of the national police **under a new ministry of "peace"**); and reestablishing relations with Venezuela, to include the reopening of the border and possible security cooperation with the country.

Total Peace. President Petro's "total peace" is arguably his core strategic concept for Colombian security. It is **based on extending a goodwill gesture** to virtually all major armed actors in the country—although, in theory, the state's offer for those with an established ideological orientation will be different than those whose activities are more solely rooted in criminal gain. As a guiding principle for participating in peace negotiations, the president has asked that such groups at a minimum **cease attacking the state, public infrastructure, and Colombian citizens**. While the Petro administration indicated that it would **suspend arrest warrants for leaders of the ELN**, and possibly other groups engaged in negotiations with the Colombian state, the details of the implementation of such a plan—and specifically how it might differ between groups—is not clear. Questions remain, including whether the government might temporarily refrain from operations **in certain parts of the country** dominated by a particular group, just as it ceded a **zone to the FARC from 1999 to 2002** while negotiating with it under the government of Andres Pastrana. Alternatively, the state might cease certain types of operation against groups with which it was in dialogue, but do so in a nationwide form.

As of the time of writing this report, the state has **identified 26 groups "eligible"** for negotiations. At the end of October 2022, Colombia's Congress **authorized the government to enter into negotiations** with illegal armed groups. In November 2022, the Petro administration **resumed negotiations with the ELN** initiated under the administration of Juan Manuel Santos. Multiple others, from FARC dissident elements to the Gulf Clan, expressed **interest in participating in the process**. In January 2023, the Petro administration announced a cease-fire that would run until **at least June of that year** between the government and five groups: the ELN, the Segundo Marquetalia, the "Central General Staff" (FARC dissidents), the **Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces** (Gulf Clan), and the "Sierra-Nevada Self Defense Forces." The ELN then announced that **they had only agreed to negotiate** a cease-fire, and the Colombian government followed up by **declaring the ELN would not be included** in the just announced cease-fire.

As illustrated by the difficulties with the temporary cease-fire, there are multiple ways that this could fail to yield the hoped-for results. A number of those consulted for this work expressed concern that

the ELN and other groups could exploit any diminution of operations against them to strengthen their organizations and illicit activities, leveraging the cessation of extradition and arrest orders such as those conferred on the ELN under current negotiations, as well as taking advantage of self-imposed restrictions by the Colombian military in areas such as aerial bombing and other operations where minors may be present. The illicit narcotics businesses of armed groups would also possibly benefit from reduced pressures on landholders supplying coca leaves for cocaine production in their areas of operation.

If agreements between the Petro government and armed groups are reached, as occurred with the demobilization of paramilitary groups following **agreements in 2005** and with the **FARC in 2016**, the state could spend substantial funds to comply with its commitments only to have other criminal groups occupy the space that the demobilized groups are yielding. As happened consistently in prior agreements, a portion of the demobilized who are **unable to find adequate options within the legitimate economy** would gravitate to join the new criminal groups that fill the void, effectively recycling the insecurity challenge into new groups after the state has spent the money. As has also occurred in the past, the ability of dissident groups not joining the accord to find sanctuary, conceal arms and wealth, and generate new revenue through illicit activities on the Venezuelan side of the border will further complicate the challenge.

Beyond such problems, there are further questions of whether the state will have the resources available to commit to a broad set of peace agreements in the context of other competing demands in the post-Covid environment. The resource constraints of the state for adequately implementing its commitments under “total peace” agreements may also be complicated by an economic base that is contracting due to the Petro administration’s **reduction of petroleum and mining**, two of Colombia’s key export sectors.

In terms of whether the negotiations will succeed, those consulted for this work note that the concessions secured from the FARC in the controversial 2016 peace agreement were achieved following significant debilitation of the group on the battlefield during the preceding years. Negotiations with the ELN, by contrast, are beginning at a time that the group is at the apogee of its power, with expanded manpower and presence along the Colombia-Venezuela border, among other places.

The decentralized nature of the ELN and the significant contribution to its power of revenues from and presence in Venezuela will make it difficult to secure an agreement with the group that meaningfully eliminates it from Colombia as a threat actor. In a similar fashion, the multiplicity of dissidents and other criminal groups with different demands will complicate and likely prolong negotiations with them. One likely scenario noted by experts consulted for this work is continuing interactions with multiple groups that do not move toward a meaningful agreement. During such talks, groups would presumably reduce overt violence against the Colombian state, infrastructure, and population as the president has demanded, while simultaneously taking advantage of the corresponding decreased actions by the Colombian state against their leadership and organizations in order to refine and expand their criminal structures and associated revenue-producing activities.

Some consulted for this work expressed concern that the complexity of simultaneous negotiations might lead President Petro to call for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution as a vehicle

for achieving a blanket settlement. Such a process, according to those concerned, could open the door for the consolidation of power by anti-democratic elements within the president's left coalition. On the other hand, because the M-19 guerilla movement to which President Petro previously belonged played a role in the compromise-rich forging of the 1991 constitution, persons more sympathetic to President Petro consulted for this work suggested that fears that he would convene a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution might be overblown.

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Following the 2016 peace accords, commitments such as **payments of monthly stipends to former FARC members** and the **JEP** were deeply controversial among Colombians who had taken pride in Colombia's system of laws and made do with lives on limited incomes within Colombia's legitimate economy. The issue of offering concessions to groups such as the FARC dissidents who rejected the prior accords, or those such as the leadership of the Second Marquetalia who agreed to the accords then returned to the battlefield to pursue actions against the Colombian state, is also likely to provoke deep divisions within Colombian society.

At the level of common crime, President Petro has also instructed the Defense Ministry to set aside **800 million pesos for youth engaged in criminality** who renounce those activities and enroll in educational programs to prepare them for jobs in the non-illicit economy. While the details of the initiative have not been spelled out by the administration, some consulted for this work expressed concern at the possibility that some youth engaged in delinquency would secure payments from the state by superficially enrolling in such programs while continuing their criminal activity. Others saw the move as a first step in a more worrisome move to create youth gangs paid by, and thus loyal to, the Petro government, similar to the "**colectivos**" established by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

Changes to Counternarcotics Efforts. President Petro, in his public discourses, including in his **speech before the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)** and **interactions with U.S. secretary of state Anthony Blinken**, has professed his intention to significantly change the counternarcotics efforts that Colombia has pursued, in partnership with the United States, for decades. President Petro has indicated, for example, that he will **not pursue forced eradication** against small-scale coca growers, focusing instead on "**industrial-scale coca production**" and those who reap significant profits in the criminal economy. President Petro has also expressed an interest in **decriminalizing marijuana**, and possibly other drugs **including cocaine**.

As with many other initiatives, the Petro administration has not yet defined the details of such policies, including the basis for distinguishing between small-scale and other actors (such as a limit to hectares under cultivation per farmer), how such limits would be determined when coca farmers often have multiple plots, and how small-scale operators of cocaine producing laboratories—or small-scale operators smuggling drugs and precursor chemicals—would be handled under a legalization policy. Nor

is it clear to what extent the administration will fund crop substitution programs, although Petro has expressed an interest in **continuing such programs** and “**voluntary eradication.**”

As noted previously, an abandonment of eradication efforts, coupled with decriminalization of small-scale coca growing and possibly marijuana, combined with reduced efforts to attack narco-trafficking organizations participating in “peace negotiations” with the government, could lead to an even greater explosion of illicit substance production and associated activities. The reopened border with Venezuela could further contribute to such illicit activities. The resulting increase in revenue to criminal groups would grow their wealth and power, and there could be significant corrupting effects of their money in a Colombian economy weakened by Covid-19 and inflation, burdened by increased taxes, and with key productive sectors of the legitimate economy impaired by the administration’s transition away from petroleum and mining.

Transformation of Armed Forces. President Petro has clearly indicated a desire to transform Colombia’s security forces to a “force for peace,” more integrated with the population. Specific changes in the military are not yet clear, although the president has mentioned of using the military to **build roads and other social activities**, as well as possibly introducing a **militarily run riverine transportation service** along the lines of the military airline Satena, run by the Colombian Air Force to serve remote Colombian locations.

During October, the Colombian congress was debating versions of a new **public security law**, including a controversial proposal to end **obligatory military service** for Colombia’s youth, or possibly to create an **alternative form of social service** for them. Experts interviewed for this work noted that in recent years the Colombian military forces have already shrunk in size and expressed concern that either option for changing the national conscription system could significantly reduce the personnel available for manpower-intensive tasks such as the protection of critical infrastructure against attacks by armed groups. Alternatively, it could force the diversion of professional soldiers to such tasks, reducing the military’s ability to prosecute operations against armed groups.

Compounding the effects of the possible elimination of conscription, the new defense minister, Iván Velásquez, issued several orders shortly after taking office with the practical effect of impeding the ability of the Colombian military to conduct operations. Most prominent among these was a directive **restricting aerial bombing of guerillas and other targets** if intelligence could not verify that minors were not present in the camps. Although the directive did not completely end the option of aerial bombing, it made such strikes almost impossible due to the difficulty of verifying prior to such an action that all of the youth identified in a camp were over 18. Some interviewed for this work expressed concern that by taking an important tool away from the Colombian military, it would effectively oblige it to use alternative means of moving against the target in which government forces were more vulnerable and thus likely to suffer higher casualties.

Beyond such policies, the extensive retirement of military officers by the president—to arrive at his preferred selection of military and police leaders under Colombia’s seniority-based system—left considerable experience gaps within the force. According to those consulted for this work, the quantity of retired general officers who had to be replaced by moving another officer into the billet they had occupied necessitated that others promoted into some of the positions that they were vacating had not

yet completed the professional military education courses required for the position and did they have the level of experience normal to their predecessors occupying those slots. The national police was reportedly impacted particularly heavily by the effects of such retirements. Military intelligence field was another area in which the problem was significant; multiple sources confirmed that retirements left Colombia's military intelligence branch with only one general officer. Complicating matters, a gap in the military education pipeline implied that it could be at least three years until another intelligence officer achieved general officer rank.

At the time of writing, only a few of the military planning processes known to implement the new government's policy direction have been completed. The key framing document used by the military and other agencies, Colombia's **National Development Plan**, is typically completed by an incoming government within its first six months in office. President Petro, however, modified the process by which this foundational document is formulated, seeking to bring a broader array of community and social groups into the process and thus introducing delays that have as yet not been resolved.

The new direction of the Petro administration, on top of the operational demands of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, has also left considerable uncertainty in the military requirements and budgeting process. The previous government had developed an elaborate, structured planning process based on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-compatible capabilities, including detailed scenarios for the future requirements of the force and options for implementing those requirements, with associated lines of action and budget commitments. Indeed, the previous Armed Forces commander **General Alberto José Mejía** had also established an entire military command for the process of military transformation, based loosely on prior U.S. military force transformation efforts. Colombia's Transformation Command is supported by an elaborate set of documents and analyses providing a roadmap for how the transformation would proceed.

The "total peace" concept of the Petro government, whether successful or not, will require a significant reevaluation of those scenarios, as well as a rethinking of Colombia's **recently modernized military doctrine** to implement the president's concepts, including the core **doctrine manual** of the Colombian Army.

The president's initiatives have also introduced doubts into the future of specialty units created within the military to address operational challenges whose role is no longer clear under the president's new vision. These include a **command for operations against narcotics transnational organized crime**, created in 2016, with special airmobile brigades to operate against narco-trafficking (BRCNA), and a similar unit for illegal mining, created in 2016. The latter innovative brigade is one of the most inter-agency-oriented entities within the Colombian military, since operations against illegal mining involve a range of other agencies dealing not only with the criminal aspect but also with the environmental damage, and the protection of women and children often involved in the illicit activities associated with the mining camps. While the president has not yet opined on the future of operations against illegal mining, his declared intention to halt the eradication of coca grown by small-scale coca farmers **arguably** puts the future role of the BRCNAs in doubt.

Military Procurement. With respect to military capability-based planning in support of the president's direction more broadly, the Colombian armed forces use, among other methodologies, a

process called Compass which identifies and translates requirements and priorities into an analysis of alternatives, lines of action, and ultimately, concrete spending commitments to pursue the chosen path to acquire needed capabilities.

Despite the budget plan laid out in Compass for specific procurements in support of force development laid out, knowledgeable experts interviewed for this work simply noted that the money in the military budget for 2022 had “been spent,” and they were waiting to see what was available in 2023 to fund needed programs, such as air superiority, the modernization of armored vehicles, and other items.

Much of the military procurement efforts possibly going forward in Colombia appear to be proceeding in a relatively ad hoc fashion. With respect to the “air superiority” program in the Colombian Ministry of Defense, for example, in October 2022, the Colombian Air Force **took President Petro for a supersonic orientation flight** in one of its aging Israeli Kfir fighters, after which the president made a general statement interpreted by some as supportive of the need to **acquire newer capabilities**. Although the U.S. F-16 was once favored for the acquisition, in December 2023, the Colombian government unexpectedly announced that it was proceeding forward to negotiate the purchase of the **French Rafael fighter**, previously considered a dark horse candidate.

In the naval domain, President Petro announced that he would call upon Colombia’s well-respected military shipyard, Cotecmar, to shift from the production of warships to craft such vehicles as hospital ships and **riverine transport craft** that better served the peace; he has also noted with approval its construction of **scientific research vessels**. At the same time, however, in September 2022, Cotecmar went forward with an initiative begun during the previous administration, signing a contract with Dutch partner Damen to **build a new frigate**.

Although the Petro administration’s defense priorities are still not yet clear, in the context of a budget in which the vast majority of spending goes to personnel and operations, rather than procurement, Colombian security experts consulted for this work expressed concern that any cuts could do grave damage to important niche capabilities such as military aviation and special forces that have taken years to build—capabilities that, once debilitated, would represent a grave loss that could take years to reconstitute.

National Police. Beyond the military, a key proposal of the Petro administration in the security arena was to **move the National Police** into a new “Ministry of Peace” to be created. In the interim, the president indicated that the police would be moved under the Interior Ministry. As with the **proposed Ministry for (Women’s) Equality**, that the president indicated would be created and **headed by his Vice President Francia Márquez**, the source of the money to create the new Ministry of Peace had not been identified, and no identifiable steps had been taken to relocate the police in any fashion. There is also some difference of opinion regarding whether Petro would need a constitutional amendment or not to do so.

Although many in the United States have advocated for the administrative separation of military and police forces in general, those interviewed for this work expressed concern regarding the adverse impact that such a move could have in the special case of Colombia, in which the location of the police under the Defense Ministry has historically played a key role in the coordination of operations and intelligence, as well as budget.

Within the police itself, the president has also indicated an **interest in eliminating**, or at **least reorganizing**, the anti-riot police Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron (Esmad). In August 2022, the new head of the National Police presented a proposal **aimed at transforming rather than eliminating the force**, recognizing that the national police continued to need an anti-riot unit. In addition, a process to change the uniforms and equipment of the Esmad had already begun before President Petro assumed office.

Regional Security Councils. President Petro has also spoken of creating “**regional security councils**” in which community leaders would be consulted on security, as well as development issues. Those interviewed for this work noted that Colombian security forces have already regularly involved political and other community leaders in consultations on security matters. Although President Petro has not clarified his proposal, it appears that he is advocating broadening the range of actors within the community to be consulted, as well as the range of topics.

End to Government Contract Workers. A little-noticed but important technical change proposed by President Petro is the **elimination of professional service contracts** as a vehicle by which the Colombian Defense Ministry and other parts of the Colombian government hire workers. These contracts have long been used in the country as a supplement to the hiring of personnel through the nation’s established civil service system. Service contracts arguably have been attractive to Colombian government agencies because they offer more flexibility for government organizations to acquire persons with specific knowledge or capabilities to support them. They are also arguably cheaper for the government over the long run because, while generally providing a higher wage than a similar civil service position, the government does not have to pay significant supplemental costs for benefits such as health insurance and retirement. Moreover, the government is generally not obliged to retain the individual when their contract ends.

President Petro, as a candidate, argued that such contracts were an **abuse of workers** precisely because they did not include long-term employment security and benefits such as healthcare and retirement, and he **vowed to eliminate them**. Such contracts, according to several interviewed for this work, also have been abused by some in power to hire their “friends” rather than those most qualified for the needed position.

Although President Petro has not yet done so, he has reportedly allowed a substantial number of the service contracts used by his predecessor to hire persons to support the office of the presidency to expire.

Foreign Policy Changes with Security Implications

Reengagement with Venezuela and the Region. Beyond the previously discussed military and police affairs, President Petro has not only reestablished political and commercial relationships with Venezuela but also spoken of an interest in reviving regional integration, which could profoundly impact the trajectory of the region and Colombia’s relationship with the country. President Petro’s renewal of relations with his Venezuelan counterpart was developed in some detail in an **October 2022 meeting** between Colombian foreign minister Álvaro Leyva and Venezuelan de facto president Nicolás Maduro. Among other items discussed, the two governments committed to some level of renewed security cooperation, although it is not yet clear whether that will extend to coordination on border-related issues or to more sensitive forms of cooperation such as intelligence exchanges. It is

likely, however, that certain pro forma types of cooperation between neighbors on good terms, such as the exchange of military attachés, or military students in each other’s institutions, may be expected.

A key element of President Petro’s engagement with the de facto Maduro regime has been the associated **reopening of the Colombia-Venezuela border**. It is not clear whether the reopening of the border will restore more than a fraction of the \$8 billion of commercial exchange that once passed between the two countries, given that Venezuela still does not have substantial products to sell or the resources to buy Colombian products in significant quantities. Nor is it clear how Venezuela will resolve the considerable debt owed by its government and companies to its Colombian counterparts. In the short term, the reopening of the border is likely to decrease—or at least redistribute—the substantial “taxes” once charged by criminal groups, as well as by bribe takers among Venezuelan security forces, for permitting the passage of persons and goods across the border. Over the longer term, however, although the border has always been highly porous even when closed, its formal opening is likely to expand options for the movement of drugs, gold, money, and contraband goods, along with the more fluid operation of armed groups on both sides.

As the time of writing, although pedestrian crossings of the border at the key checkpoint near Cúcuta **had been allowed**, the Venezuelan side had not yet manned the crossings at a sufficient level **to permit the regular passage of high volumes of goods and people**. The two sides had also not resolved issues preventing airline flights between the countries by the embargoed Venezuelan carrier Conviasa, or by the Colombian regional airline **Wingo**, **although multiple airlines have applied** to serve the route between the countries.

Beyond Venezuela, President Petro has expressed a desire to reinvigorate efforts at regional political and economic integration. His proposals as presidential candidate included **integrating the left-governed nations of Venezuela and Chile** into the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), along with possibly developing a common regional currency as an alternative to the dollar. Petro’s orientation toward regionalism, if carried forward, would also likely support the **revival of the defunct Union of South American Nation (UNASUR)** organization being proposed by others. It would insert Colombia into a new multilateral dynamic of left-oriented governments in which President Petro aspires, according to several consulted for this work, to play a leading role.

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The Future of the U.S.-Colombia. Relationship

The policy directions that President Petro has announced, both as a candidate and after assuming office, will, if even partially implemented, require a fundamental shift in the basis of Colombia’s relationship with the United States that has prevailed and deepened in the more than two decades since the **start of Plan Colombia in 2000**. The president’s shift away from small-scale coca eradication and other counterdrug activities, along with a possible departure from a key role for the Colombian military in the

struggle against armed groups if the “total peace” plan succeeds, will require the United States to find new bases for cooperation. With likely continued resource limitations for security operations, the overall scope of U.S.-Colombia cooperation may shift, even if alternative bases for that cooperation are found. There are also tactical risks: if routine disputes arise in the course of U.S.-Colombian security cooperation, those within the Petro government who wish to see less cooperation with the United States could use such items as a vehicle for restricting security cooperation and other types of U.S. partnership.

Despite such considerations, President Petro has, to date, continued to emphasize goodwill toward the United States, including a **very positive interaction with U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken**, even if differences on individual issues such as the **U.S. policy toward Cuba were notable** in the press conference following the exchange. President Petro’s emphasis on human rights, environmental issues, social justice, and the promotion and protection of **women** and disadvantaged minority groups suggest logical points of convergence with the Biden administration.

On the security front, although the orientation of the Petro administration has cast doubt on the direction of major military procurements (such as possible funding for and **selection of the U.S. F-16 fighter** for Colombia’s military air superiority program), ministerial-level cooperation between the United States and Colombia, and an appreciation of the value of U.S. assistance reportedly remains high. Positive routine military interactions between the United States and Colombia have continued across a range of areas. Notable examples include Colombia’s commitment to host the **UNITAS joint military exercise** next year, its **annual participation in the RIMPAC naval exercise**, and its hosting of **Southern Vanguard 2023**, with a focus on NATO interoperability in weapons and procedures. The United States is also engaged in multiple programs providing value for the Colombian Armed Forces, including providing C-130 transport aircraft for Colombia’s air mobility program and reconnaissance assets to replace Colombia’s aging Scan Eagle aircraft, among others.

Beyond such engagement and contributions, if, **as President Petro’s own defense minister has noted**, the implementation of “total peace” requires sustained or additional capabilities for the military, or if the “total peace” concept does not work out as President Petro hopes, he may find the need to deepen his work with the United States as Colombia’s a partner of choice.

Prospects for the Future

In the interplay between complex economic and security dynamics, and given the dynamics of President Petro’s team in conceptualizing, adapting, and implementing policies, the course for Colombia is far from certain.

In the optimistic—albeit less probable—scenario, President Petro’s “total peace” initiative could succeed in halting a significant portion of violence by armed insurgent and criminal groups in the country, creating a space in which the state can extend a credible presence and positively connect with local populations, enabling economic growth while transitioning from petroleum and mining exports to a more sustainable green economy. The stimulus of green energy projects and infrastructure investment, the commerce stimulated by the reopening of the frontier with Venezuela, and expanded tourism made possible by the peace dividend would play a key role in this process.

In this positive scenario, the United States would conceivably transition from a relationship principally focused on security cooperation and counterdrug activities to one built around helping Colombia to strengthen its institutions, implement peace, develop a greener economy, and prosper with the help of Western investment and tourism.

In the negative scenario, however, the Petro administration's disengagement from acting against small-scale coca production, its cessation of extraditions and operations against key armed group leaders in the attempt to secure peace, and the caution and restrictions in military operations stimulated by its policies could enable the significant strengthening of criminal groups in the country, ultimately expanding both corruption and violence. At the same time, the government's tax policies and disincentives to Colombia's core export-oriented industries of petroleum and mining would compound the effects of expanded violence, uncertainty, reduced government effectiveness, and credibility, which would serve to suppress economic activity and generate capital flight. These problems, in turn, would fuel citizen desperation and participation in the informal and criminal economies as the only viable alternative. In this scenario, open frontiers with Venezuela, possibly compounded by an inability to resolve past debts of Colombian companies with the neighboring Maduro government and other disputes, would feed a synergy between expanding criminal economies in both countries, leading to lawlessness and criminal recruitment in the frontier region.

In such a negative scenario, Colombia's once close relations with the United States might become increasingly strained, as initial policy changes such as the cessation of extraditions to the United States and cooperation on drug eradication and operations against transnational criminal groups would go on to transform Colombia—in partnership with Venezuela—into a criminal nexus: sending cocaine and other drugs to U.S. markets, effectively harboring international threat actors, and contributing to the destabilization of the region.

Whatever the outcome of the complex dynamics defining Colombia's path, the result will be impactful on the security, prosperity, and direction of the country, as well as on neighbors such as Venezuela, the rest of the region, and the United States—for which Colombia has been a key partner for more than two decades.

Recommendations and Conclusions

In engaging with Colombia in its high-stakes journey, the Biden administration is well advised in seeking common ground where it can work together, while remaining respectful of Colombia's sovereignty and the right of its democratically elected government to choose its path, within the limits of international law and its treaty and other commitments. At the same time, the U.S. government should recognize that its opinion is a point of reference for a range of Colombians. While continuing to constructively engage and offer the Petro administration all possible support where U.S. and Colombian interests coincide, the United States should not hesitate to respectfully express its concerns if it perceives that the Petro administration is venturing down a dangerous or self-destructive path. It should not confuse expressing disapproval with disrespecting Colombia's sovereignty, since the perception of U.S. "concurrency" within Colombia on ill-advised policies could undermine voices within the nation's still pluralistic political system, which is important for avoiding such errors.

The United States should also be fully prepared for the possibility of negative scenarios involving a significant withering of the U.S.-Colombia relationship. U.S. policymakers in the security domain and

others should be cautious not to delude themselves, as arguably happened with Venezuela two decades before, that because the political and security relationship is so close, and because there are so many “activities” binding the two nations together, the relationship cannot change little by little. If Colombia’s political and security dynamic or its relationship with the United States begins to move in a decisively negative direction, U.S. policymakers must not grasp at straws, emphasizing the continuation of positive individual interactions, while overlooking the coming “train wreck.”

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At the tactical level, those working with Colombia at the U.S. embassy and in Washington need to be particularly sensitive to incidents that could create opportunities for those who wish to impede U.S.-Colombia cooperation and create openings for the Petro government to work with other actors. While the United States is consistently careful in its interactions with Colombia, as with other partners, it is easy for causes of friction to arise due to a large number of ongoing program interactions and personnel. The United States needs to be ready to engage with the Petro administration, and with the broader public, proactively, respectfully, and with transparency should such issues arise.

The sky is not yet falling with the Petro administration in Colombia, yet clouds are gathering. Interested stakeholders in Colombia, the United States, and elsewhere should continue to engage with a mixture of hope and vigilance in case foundations for that hope evaporate. ■

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