



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

U.S.-Colombia Security Relations: Future Prospects in Brief

February 14, 2023

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47426



R47426

February 14, 2023

June S. Beittel

Analyst in Latin American
Affairs

U.S.-Colombia Security Relations: Future Prospects in Brief

Colombia and the United States have a two-decade partnership concentrated on mutual security issues. An early focus on combating narcotics trafficking and counterterrorism broadened to include close cooperation on issues such as human rights, trade, and economic development. Many Colombian programs supported by the United States—especially those related to security—have enjoyed bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress over the past five U.S. Administrations. President Joe Biden has referred to Colombia as an “essential ally.”

The election of new Colombian President Gustavo Petro in June 2022 has the potential to upend or at least shift key pillars of the U.S.-Colombia security relationship. Within his first 100 days in office, Petro unveiled a new Total Peace program intended to end violence by armed groups, increase investment in areas ravaged by conflict, and reform the military and police. One of Petro’s announced goals is to move the Colombian National Police (CNP) out of the Ministry of Defense and transform the military into a peacetime force.

Elements of Petro’s Total Peace program may affect core programs that have long underpinned the U.S.-Colombia security partnership. The new government has announced several security-related changes, including shifts in its approach to coca crop eradication and other illicit drug supply control programs; increased cooperation with Venezuela, including normalizing diplomatic and economic relations and opening the common border; dialogue between the government and organized crime groups to achieve a broader peace; and reforms of Colombia’s military and police. Petro’s proposals could affect four key areas of bilateral security cooperation:

1. Suppression of the illicit drug trade, particularly cultivation of coca and drug trafficking
2. Resistance to the authoritarian government in Venezuela and the handling of Venezuelans who fled to Colombia
3. Implementation of a 2016 peace accord with the primary insurgency battling the central Colombian government during a half-century-long internal armed conflict
4. Professional development of the Colombian National Police and military and strong military-to-military cooperation

The evolving direction of the bilateral relationship may be of interest to the 118th Congress in its oversight role over foreign policy and bilateral assistance to Colombia.

For additional background, see CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*; CRS Insight IN11955, *Colombia: Presidential Elections in 2022*; and CRS In Focus IF12181, *Colombia: Police Reform and Congressional Concerns*. For a historical perspective, see CRS Report R42982, *Colombia’s Peace Process Through 2016*.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Congressional Support for the U.S.-Colombia Security Partnership | 2 |
| Colombia’s Current Security Challenges | 2 |
| The Total Peace Program and Potential Changes to Pillars of Security Relations | 4 |
| Counternarcotics and Illegal Drugs..... | 5 |
| Relations with Venezuela | 6 |
| Negotiations with Armed Groups to Achieve Total Peace | 7 |
| Military and Police Reforms | 8 |
| U.S.-Colombia Security Relations and the 118 th Congress | 9 |
| Outlook..... | 11 |

Figures

| | |
|--|---|
| Figure 1. National Liberation Army (ELN) Insurgents, Dissident Fronts, and Other Crime Groups in Colombia | 3 |
|--|---|

Contacts

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Author Information..... | 13 |
|-------------------------|----|

Introduction

Colombia and the United States share a long-standing partnership concentrated on mutual security issues, including counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and regional pressure on Venezuela. Over the past two decades, the U.S.-Colombia security relationship generally has received broad bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress. For 22 years, the bilateral relationship was shaped by a security strategy known as Plan Colombia and Plan Colombia's successor strategies.¹ More recently, the partnership has focused on implementation of a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the primary insurgency battling the central Colombian government during a half-century-long internal armed conflict.

Since 2000, Colombia has received more than \$13 billion in congressionally appropriated foreign assistance from the U.S. Departments of Defense and State and from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In March 2022, President Joe Biden cited Colombia as an essential U.S. ally and “the lynchpin” to regional security in Latin America.²

In June 2022, Colombian voters elected former Senator Gustavo Petro as president in a three-point margin victory over Rodolfo Hernández, a construction magnate and one-term mayor of Bucaramanga, Colombia's seventh largest city. President Petro, inaugurated in August 2022, is Colombia's first leftist president and leads a coalition of leftist parties known as the Historic Pact. Petro is a longtime leader of the political opposition and was once a member of the M-19, a leftist guerrilla group that demobilized in the late 1980s.³ Following his election, Petro surprised many observers by forging a congressional coalition that included the traditionally dominant Liberal and Conservative parties and appointing an ideologically diverse Cabinet.⁴

Petro promised sweeping changes to reduce long-standing rural-urban inequities and full implementation of the 2016 peace accord. His program, known as *Total Peace*, seeks to end violence by all major armed groups, increase investment in areas ravaged by conflict, and reform the military and police. As part of this program, Petro has proposed changes to key policies at the foundation of the U.S.-Colombia security relationship.⁵ Nevertheless, after General Laura Richardson, head of U.S. Southern Command, met President Petro in September 2022, she affirmed the continued strength of the U.S.-Colombia security bond, stating, “the Western Hemisphere is largely free and secure because of Colombia's stabilizing efforts, and Colombia is the United States' closest security partner.”⁶

¹ The Colombian government unveiled the Colombia-U.S. Plan for Peace, Prosperity, and the Strengthening of the State—shortened to Plan Colombia—in 1999. For more background on Plan Colombia and the subsequent security strategies patterned on it, see CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

² White House, “Remarks by President Biden and President Duque of the Republic of Colombia before Bilateral Meeting,” speeches and remarks, March 10, 2022.

³ *Economist*, “Who Is Gustavo Petro?,” August 6, 2022; CRS Insight IN11955, *Colombia: Presidential Elections in 2022*; Adam Isacson, “A Fresh Start for Colombia ... and for U.S. Policy?,” *Responsible Statecraft*, June 22, 2022.

⁴ *Latin American Weekly Report*, “Colombia: Petro Forges Formidable Coalition,” July 7, 2022.

⁵ Cynthia J. Arnson, “A New Era for U.S.-Colombia Relations,” *Americas Quarterly*, August 2, 2022 (hereinafter Arnson, “A New Era”); and Will Freeman, “Can Petro Pull Off ‘Total Peace’ in Colombia?,” *Americas Quarterly*, September 26, 2022 (hereinafter Freeman, “Can Petro Pull Off ‘Total Peace?’”).

⁶ U.S. Southern Command Public Affairs, “SOUTHCOM Commander Visits Colombia, Brazil,” September 12, 2022; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, Report no. 95, September 27, 2022.

This report discusses how Petro’s Total Peace proposals could affect four key areas of bilateral security cooperation with the United States:

1. Suppression of the illicit drug trade, particularly cultivation of coca (the main ingredient of cocaine) and drug trafficking
2. Resistance to the authoritarian government in Venezuela and handling of Venezuelans who fled to Colombia
3. Implementation of the 2016 peace accord with the FARC, following years of joint U.S.-Colombia counterterrorism and counternarcotics cooperation
4. Professional development of the Colombian National Police (CNP) and military and strong military-to-military cooperation

The report also discusses recent legislative activity and potential issues for Congress related to the evolving U.S.-Colombia security partnership.

Congressional Support for the U.S.-Colombia Security Partnership

Since Petro’s election, some Members of Congress have expressed interest in the potential opportunities and consequences associated with Petro’s proposed changes in security policy. The Petro government’s stated commitment to bringing about total peace has raised expectations for reduced violence in Colombia. At the same time, the new approach may present challenges to current modes of bilateral cooperation, potentially raising congressional concerns.

The 117th Congress enacted legislation affecting U.S. policy toward Colombia (see “U.S.-Colombia Relations and the 118th Congress,” below). In addition, some legislation introduced in the 117th Congress reflected long-standing congressional consensus favoring good relations with Colombia. For example, the United States-Colombia Bicentennial Alliance Act (S. 4334), introduced in May 2022 in the Senate, described and sought to expand long-standing binational collaboration to support inclusive economic growth, advance peace and democratic governance in Colombia, strengthen security cooperation, and address humanitarian needs. In 2022, the bicentennial year of U.S.-Colombia diplomatic relations, the House of Representatives passed a resolution (H.Res. 998) and the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee introduced a bill (S. 3805) to honor and expand the “vital strategic alliance” between the United States and Colombia.

Colombia’s Current Security Challenges⁷

The Petro government’s approach to security is shaped by Colombia’s violent history, including its last several decades of internal armed conflict, which left 9 million victims and killed an estimated 400,000 Colombians—mainly civilians.⁸ Petro’s strategy differs significantly from his predecessors’ in meeting longstanding security challenges in the latest iteration of societal violence.⁹ Colombia endured more than a half-century of internal armed conflict before the 2016

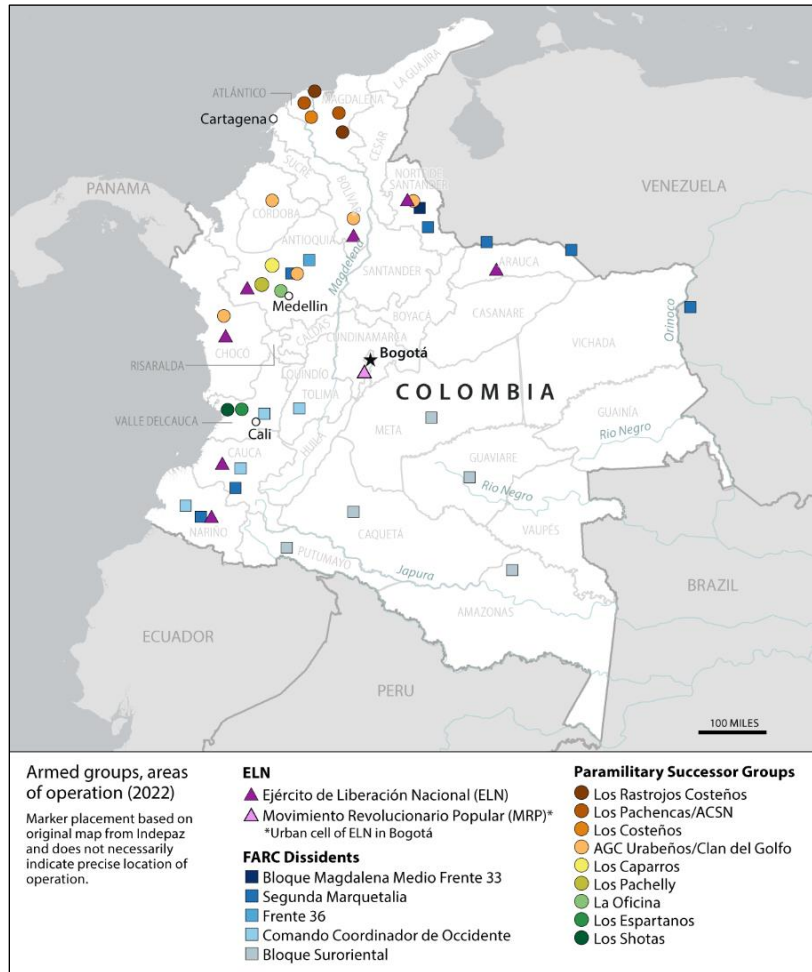
⁷ For more background and detail presented in this overview of Colombia’s security landscape, see CRS Report R43813, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

⁸ For cumulative victims data, see Colombia’s Truth Commission, *Hay Futuro Si Hay Verdad, Informe Final, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición: Hallazgos y Recomendaciones de la Comisión de la Verdad de Colombia*, August 2022.

⁹ Many observers cite the leadership of former Colombian Presidents Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) with the vision for overcoming Colombia’s insecurity and violence and for building relations with the United States as Colombia’s preferred strategic partner. See Stuart Lippe, “There Is No Silver Bullet and Other Lessons from Colombia,” *Interagency Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3 (fall 2014), pp. 23-35.

peace accords with the FARC. During a U.N.-monitored demobilization in 2017, some 13,300 members of the FARC disarmed. The FARC transformed from a leftist guerrilla army into a political party known as *Comunes*. Neither the government nor the rebels have upheld all their commitments under the peace accord. The agreement initially led to a significant decline in violence, but that proved short-lived. The U.N. Mission in Colombia verified in December 2022 that 355 demobilized former FARC combatants had been killed since Colombia’s Congress ratified the 2016 peace accord.¹⁰ Some guerrillas, known as *FARC dissidents*, never demobilized (or rearmed) and have added new recruits.

Figure I. National Liberation Army (ELN) Insurgents, Dissident Fronts, and Other Crime Groups in Colombia



Source: CRS with information from Colombian Institute for Development and Peace Studies (INDEPAZ), at <https://indepaz.org.co/22-grupos-armados-buscan-sumarse-a-la-paz-total/>.

In the FARC’s absence, various groups have competed for control of criminal markets in rural and peripheral parts of Colombia. These armed groups fall into four broad categories: (1) the leftist National Liberation Army (ELN, a State Department-designated foreign terrorist organization); (2) the criminal groups that are successors of paramilitary self-defense forces, such

¹⁰ United Nations, *United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/1004*, December 28, 2022. The 2016 peace accord guaranteed governmental protection of demobilized FARC, but the government has been unable to prevent a few hundred assassinations, according to the U.N. mission.

as the *Clan del Golfo* (Gulf Clan); (3) dissident FARC members; and (4) other disparate criminal groups. (See **Figure 1** for armed groups' areas of operation.)

With the exception of the ELN, the armed groups in Colombia do not appear to be ideologically motivated; they exist to compete for drug and other illicit profits through territorial control.¹¹ In the areas under their power, armed groups pressure populations to cultivate coca or conduct other illicit businesses. They intimidate and extort local authorities and enterprises, punishing those who do not comply. A contest for power among armed groups after the FARC demobilized also led to increased violence against social leaders, human rights defenders, and former FARC.¹²

Security conditions along the Venezuelan-Colombian border exacerbate the challenges posed by the proliferation of armed groups in Colombia. The Venezuelan administration, led by President Nicolás Maduro, is ideologically sympathetic to the ELN. The Venezuelan military and other Venezuelan authorities have been complicit in the ELN's illicit activities in many instances. Venezuela has provided the ELN with safe haven from the Colombian military, allowing the ELN to expand into Venezuelan territory and criminal markets. Moreover, border controls curtailing licit flows of people and trade between Venezuela and Colombia have had the unintended effect of providing armed groups, including the ELN, new opportunities to enrich themselves by asserting control over illicit trafficking flows between the two countries.¹³

Former President Iván Duque's crackdown in response to nationwide popular protest in May and June 2021 added to the challenges Colombia faced during Duque's term (2018-2022), which included a sharp, pandemic-related economic contraction. As the Duque government responded to mostly peaceful protest that nevertheless caused an estimated \$3 billion in damages, more than 46 civilians died, resulting in international condemnation.¹⁴ Duque's popularity declined and his low approval ratings arguably reinforced anti-incumbent sentiments that helped propel Petro and his leftist coalition to electoral victory.¹⁵ Duque initiated some public security reforms to increase CNP accountability. President Petro has expanded the reform agenda toward greater protections for citizen protest and reorienting the military toward peacetime missions.¹⁶

The Total Peace Program and Potential Changes to Pillars of Security Relations

Four elements of President Petro's Total Peace program and security agenda may place U.S.-Colombia security relations in flux:

¹¹ This distinction became law under the Petro government (see footnote 29), close to Petro's first 100 days in office. It identifies two types of armed actors, ideological and non-ideological—or criminal, in motivation.

¹² United Nations, *United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/1004*, December 28, 2022.

¹³ For contrasting views regarding the legitimacy of normalizing relations with Venezuela as a means to open negotiations with an armed group operating in both countries, see Joshua Collins and Daniela Diaz, "Venezuela Holds the Key as Petro Looks to Kickstart His Colombia Peace Plan," *New Humanitarian*, November 9, 2022. See also, R. Evan Ellis, "Venezuela: Understanding Political, External, and Criminal Actors in an Authoritarian State," *Small Wars Journal* website, January 14, 2022.

¹⁴ For additional background, see CRS In Focus IF12181, *Colombia: Police Reform and Congressional Concerns*; "Colombians Choose a New President Amid General Discontent," Associated Press, May 29, 2022.

¹⁵ For more background on Colombia's election, see CRS Insight IN11955, *Colombia: Presidential Elections in 2022*. See also, "The Coming Swing to the Right," *Economist*, December 3, 2022.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Freeman, "Can Petro Pull Off 'Total Peace?'"

1. Colombia's approach to the illicit drug trade and management of its consequences
2. Normalization of Colombia's diplomatic and economic relations with Venezuela, and reopening the common border
3. The Colombian government's negotiations, launched in November 2022, to get all of the country's major criminal and insurgent groups to surrender and disarm
4. Reforms of Colombia's military and police

These program elements may reframe U.S.-Colombia cooperation, with potentially critical departures from the existing relationship.

Counternarcotics and Illegal Drugs

Joint activity to prevent cocaine and other illegal drugs from reaching the United States has been a cornerstone of U.S.-Colombia security cooperation for several decades. Reduction of cocaine production at its source was a central goal of the "whole-of-government" security strategy known as Plan Colombia, for which the United States was Colombia's major international partner. The U.S. government has funded and supported counterdrug activities such as interdiction, coca crop eradication, judicial support, and rural alternative development.¹⁷ The U.S. government also has been a partner to Colombia's security forces (both the armed services and the police) in counterdrug activities for decades.

Despite years of effort and cooperation, Colombia remains the largest cocaine producer in the world and the United States remains the largest cocaine consumer. Some analysts describe this fact as proof that a so-called militarized supply-reduction strategy, in close cooperation with the United States, has not succeeded.¹⁸ Record highs in production reached in recent years now exceed cocaine production in the 1980s, the era of notorious Colombian trafficker Pablo Escobar, and in the decades when the FARC and right-wing paramilitary groups dominated Colombia's cocaine trade (roughly 1995-2015). In the last ten years, estimated cocaine production has tripled.

Petro has embraced the view that prior strategies amounted to failure and, in response, has outlined a new drug strategy. The new policy seeks to avoid punishing and arresting peasant farmers who cultivate illicit drug crops (e.g., coca, opium poppy) and to provide technical assistance to help these farmers substitute legal crops, gain access to land through improved land titling efforts, and prioritize "voluntary" rather than forced coca crop removal. Forced drug eradication would be reserved for crops grown by corporate (i.e., large-scale) coca purveyors and by small farmers who voluntarily agree to eradicate their crops but fail to follow through. It rejects the widespread aerial eradication (spraying) of coca that was part of U.S.-Colombia cooperation for three decades..

Key goals of Petro's Total Peace plan include improving rural portions of the country and elevating their economies. In addition, Petro has indicated that his focus in completing implementation of the FARC-government peace accord is on land distribution and sustainable

¹⁷ For background on U.S.-Colombia antidrug cooperation, see CRS Report R44779, *Colombia's Changing Approach to Drug Policy*.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Economist*, "Booming Cocaine Production Suggests the War on Drugs Has Failed," October 13, 2022. For estimates, see White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), "ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Production in the Andean Region," press release, July 14, 2022; U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report, Statistical Annex*, June 2022.

rural development, which are among the least-implemented peace accord commitments.¹⁹ In press remarks after an October 2022 meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and President Petro, Secretary Blinken stated, “we strongly support the holistic approach that President Petro’s administration is taking to counternarcotics.”²⁰ However, some analysts favor more traditional supply-reduction methods and argue a holistic climate-attuned approach may siphon off needed resources to enact some of those prior well-known strategies.²¹

In late October 2022, in Putumayo, a major coca-growing region of southern Colombia, Petro announced an effort to compensate coca growers for not planting coca. He argued that this program would encourage farmers to let the forest regenerate by providing government payments to farmers who did not plant and allow them to instead serve as environmental stewards. Petro claims his policy has climate benefits as well as reducing drug trafficking-related violence and combating peasant farmer recruitment into other criminal businesses, such as illicit mining.²² The Petro government also has expressed interest in cocaine legalization and legal domestic use. Some analysts suggest this may not be a near-term priority.²³

Relations with Venezuela

Another key pillar of the U.S.-Colombia security relationship has been a common approach to Venezuela. Since taking office, Petro has worked to revive diplomatic and economic ties with neighboring Venezuela. He observed during his presidential campaign that reaching a peace accord with the ELN would require rebuilding a working relationship between Colombia and Venezuela. Over 2.5 million Venezuelans reside in Colombia, the majority of whom were granted a decade of temporary protected status by the Duque government in 2021. These migrants are vulnerable to criminal exploitation and pose an ongoing domestic security challenge.²⁴ Fulfilling a campaign promise, Petro reopened Colombia’s border with Venezuela on September 28, 2022, after a seven-year closure. In early November 2022, President Petro, in one of his first foreign trips, met with President Maduro (whom the United States does not recognize as president) at the presidential palace in Caracas. Later in November, top Colombian military and Venezuelan military leaders also met.

¹⁹ See Josefina Echavarría Álvarez et al., “Executive Summary,” in *Five Years After the Signing of the Colombian Final Agreement: Reflections from Implementation Monitoring*, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame, June 2, 2022.

²⁰ Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Colombian President Gustavo Petro at a Joint Press Availability,” U.S. Department of State, Remarks to Press, October 3, 2022.

²¹ See issues raised in: Pedro Arenas, “Colombia: Will New Drug Policies Damage U.S. Ties?,” American University Latin American and Latino Studies Blog, October 5, 2022; Daniel F. Runde, “Revisiting Counter-Narcotics Policy in the Western Hemisphere,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 27, 2022; R. Evan Ellis, “Colombia’s Security Challenges, the Government Response, and the Future of U.S.-Colombia Relations,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2023.

²² *LatinNews: Security & Strategic Review*, “First Clues on Petro’s Drug Policy in Colombia,” December 2022. Over half of all gold mined in Colombia is mined illegally. See R. Evan Ellis, “Colombia’s Security Challenges.”

²³ In this opinion piece, the author asserts, “Petro has correctly condemned the drug war for its failures, but his critique has amounted to mere posturing.” See Daniel Raisbeck, “Why Colombia Should Fully Legalize Cocaine,” *foreignpolicy.com*, November 15, 2022. See also Arnson, “A New Era;” R. Evan Ellis, “Colombia’s Security Challenges.”

²⁴ Elizabeth Dickinson, “Colombia’s Last Guerrillas Make First Step Toward ‘Total Peace,’” ICG, November 23, 2022; ICG, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia*, Latin America Report no. 94, August 9, 2022.

Previous governments in Colombia shared the U.S. government position that Maduro is an illegitimate authoritarian leader who has stolen recent elections.²⁵ In reengaging with Venezuela under Maduro, Petro effectively ended Colombia's support for the U.S. policy of isolating Maduro and called into question his government's commitment to objectives the U.S. and Colombian governments once shared.²⁶ In October 2022, the Biden Administration urged the Colombian government to "hold accountable governments that have discarded democratic norms, such as Maduro's."²⁷ In response to Colombia's reopening its border with Venezuela, the nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch reported on Maduro's role in the political and humanitarian crises that drove 7 million Venezuelans to flee and the Venezuelan security forces' complicity with the ELN.²⁸

Negotiations with Armed Groups to Achieve Total Peace

A third shared U.S. and Colombian concern has been the containment of the fragmented armed and criminal groups. On November 4, 2022, Petro signed Law 2272 (Total Peace). The Total Peace program authorized the government to engage in negotiations with illegal, violent armed groups, including those deemed insurgents with a political ideology, such as the ELN.²⁹ The program also authorized, for the first time, negotiations with high-impact criminal organizations that do not purport to have political goals. Total Peace implemented a novel process akin to a collective plea bargain with known criminals, even prior to the criminal group members being in custody or having surrendered to authorities, with the parties willing to enter a surrender dialogue on the basis of an agreed ceasefire.

In its first 100 days, the Petro government outlined a process to determine which groups had standing to negotiate, and opened preliminary discussions in parts of the country plagued with high poverty, violence, and the presence of armed groups. Talks with the ELN opened on November 21, 2022, hosted in Venezuela.³⁰ As of December 2022, dozens of high-impact criminal groups reportedly had expressed interest in talks;³¹ however, there are no reports of

²⁵ Isayen Herrera and Julie Turkewitz, "Engaging or Enabling an Autocrat? Colombian Leader Visits Venezuela," *New York Times*, November 1, 2022; Ryan C. Berg and Alexandra Winkler, "Maduro's Fortune: Petro in Colombia and a Left-Leaning Latin America," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 27, 2022; and Douglas Farah, *The Maduro Regime's Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America*, Atlantic Council, August 12, 2020.

²⁶ For more, see "Declaración conjunta del Presidente de la República de Colombia, Gustavo Petro Urrego y del Presidente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro," (in Meeting Between Colombian and Venezuelan Presidents on Nov. 1), *Telesur*, October 31, 2022. One element not directly related to security that the leaders discussed was the reentry of Venezuela to the Inter-American Human Rights System.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Colombian President Gustavo Petro at a Joint Press Availability," remarks to the press, October 3, 2022.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Letter to Colombian President Gustavo Petro on the Reestablishment of Diplomatic Relations with the Nicolás Maduro Government," October 25, 2022.

²⁹ Law 2272 extended former Law 418 of 1997 to authorize peace talks with illegal armed groups and with "high impact" criminal groups. Article 2 of the law, also known as the Total Peace law, provides protection for those representing a group involved in either of two processes: negotiations, if rebels, or surrender talks, if criminals. Senate of the Republic of Colombia, Law 2272, November 4, 2022. CRS communication with Colombian Embassy to the United States, November 29, 2022.

³⁰ Vivian Sequera, "Colombia, ELN Rebels Start Peace Talks, Hoping to End Six Decades of War," Reuters, November 21, 2022; Santiago Torrado, "Proceso de Paz con el ELN: Cuáles son los Puntos de la Agenda y cómo Serán las Negociaciones en el Gobierno de Gustavo Petro," *El País*, November 23, 2022.

³¹ Richard McColl, "Can Colombia's President Achieve 'Total Peace'?" *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2022 (hereinafter McColl, "Colombia's President"); Luis Jamie Acosta, "Colombia Says 10 Armed Groups Agree to Unilateral Ceasefire," Reuters, September 28, 2022; Juan Diego Posadaen, "Colombia's Risky Bet on Total Peace,"

collective surrender talks with criminal groups that began in the first 100 days of Petro's term. The first round of ELN-government peace talks ended in mid-December 2022, with formal talks slated to resume in Mexico in early 2023.³² On December 31, 2022, Petro's government announced it had reached cease-fire agreements with a Gulf Clan faction, two FARC dissident groups, and the Sierra Nevada Self-Defense Groups.³³

Military and Police Reforms

Military and police reforms have long been a shared U.S. and Colombian concern, and early action by the Petro government indicates major changes in this area. The Petro Administration is reconsidering the role of the Colombian military and pressing forward on police reform. Petro selected Iván Velásquez, a human rights lawyer and prosecutor who has denounced military abuses, as defense minister; this selection may presage the changes Petro has said he wants to see in the military, such as reconfiguring the force to be an "Army of Peace." Broadly, Petro says he wants Colombia's security forces to protect civilians, reduce corruption within their ranks, and establish better relations and cooperation with rural Colombians.³⁴

Petro has replaced top Colombian military and police leadership, including some generals and high-level commanders who enjoyed close working relationships with their U.S. counterparts.³⁵ These changes may affect the capacity for joint security operations until new relationships form. Although Defense Minister Velásquez maintains there has been no reduction in security force activity during the first months of the Petro Administration, the government has dismissed almost half of Colombia's highest-ranking police and army officials, some of whom had faced accusations of wrongdoing. In general, officers supportive of the 2016 peace process reportedly replaced those who were removed. Reportedly, the government let go more than 50 officers, and some of these removals did not follow established procedure.³⁶

Petro's government has embraced some reforms announced by his predecessor, such as increasing gender and ethnic diversity. Petro also has proposed reforms to the military's health and pension systems. In addition, Petro campaigned heavily on police reform. He proposed further changes to (or the possible dissolution of) the CNP's anti-riot police, ESMAD (its Spanish acronym), to improve domestic policing, especially in managing citizen protest. Petro also says he intends to move the CNP out of the Defense Ministry; he has contended that the Defense Ministry's direction of the CNP has led to a militarized police force with higher risk of citizen abuse. Critics

InSight Crime, September 13, 2022.

³² *LatinNews Weekly Report*, "Colombia: First Agreement Reached in ELN Talks," December 15, 2022; Joshua Collins, "Colombia Peace Talks with ELN Rebels Set to Resume Amid Tensions," *Al Jazeera*, February 13, 2023.

³³ On December 30, 2022, the government published Decree 2655 of 2022, regarding High-Impact Organized Criminal Structures, and announced bilateral cease-fires with: the Central Command of the FARC-EP, FARC-EP Segunda Marquetalia, Autodefensas Gaitanistas of Colombia (a faction of the Gulf Clan), and Sierra Nevada Self-Defense Groups. Embassy of Colombia to the United States, electronic communication, January 18, 2023. See also, "'Total Peace': the Difficulties that the Petro Government has had to Face in its Main Bet," *Semana*, February 2, 2023.

³⁴ "Petro Estudia Reforma al Interior de las Fuerzas Militares 'Para Preparar y Educar al Soldado,'" *La FM*, August 20, 2022; "Petro Tells Colombian Armed Forces to be Ready to become an 'Army of Peace,'" *Mercopress*, August 22, 2023.

³⁵ R. Evan Ellis, "Colombia's Security Challenges."

³⁶ Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombia's Petro Replaces Military Commanders in Human Rights Drive," *Reuters*, August 12, 2022; Daniel Pardo, "La Purga de la Cúpula Militar y otras 3 Inéditas Medidas con las que Petro Sacude las Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia," *BBC Mundo*, September 6, 2022.

of separating the police and military maintain the move would hinder coordination and information sharing, which they say are vital for meeting Colombia's security threats.³⁷

Adequate Colombian defense spending is another area of bilateral focus. Under Plan Colombia, the United States provided substantial financial support to Colombia's defense budget. Over the last two decades, the Colombian government has prioritized defense spending, including for joint U.S.-Colombia security and counternarcotics programs. Colombia budgets between 3% and 4% of its gross domestic product for defense and maintains the second-largest army in the region.³⁸ Several U.S. policymakers have commended prior Colombian governments' commitment to the country's security, and the public's willingness to pay a wealth tax in order to cover security expenditures. Some critics contend that, although Colombia far outspends its neighbors on defense, its military buildout has been lopsided and has produced a force that often violates human rights and fails to protect its citizenry.³⁹ Petro has indicated plans to reduce future security and defense budgets, potentially affecting aspects of security reform.⁴⁰ Some observers contend that Petro may struggle to retain the confidence of his security forces or hold together his diverse, unwieldy congressional majority.⁴¹

U.S.-Colombia Security Relations and the 118th Congress

As noted above, the changes adopted in the early months of the Petro Administration may affect traditional U.S.-Colombia security relations. Through its support of Plan Colombia and other bilateral counterdrug and assistance programs over the years, Congress has played an active role in shaping the bilateral security relationship. Looking ahead, the 118th Congress may examine evolving issues related to this relationship, security programs and funding, and underlying strategies and policies.

Prior congressional action prioritized close examination of Plan Colombia and its successor programs, especially with respect to countering drug trafficking. In 2017, Congress created the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission (WHDP) to review policies on the illegal drug supply, drug abuse, and the damage from narcotics trafficking.⁴² A December 2020 WHDP report laid out several recommendations to guide bilateral relations with Colombia and other major partners.⁴³ Regarding Colombia, the report supported licit livelihood programs in coca-growing regions and a reexamination of traditional drug eradication methods. It also urged U.S.

³⁷ For more background, see CRS In Focus IF12181, *Colombia: Police Reform and Congressional Concerns*. See also, R. Evan Ellis, "Colombia's Security Challenges."

³⁸ For instance, the 2023 approved budget for the Colombian Defense Ministry is slightly less than 4% of Colombia's gross domestic product. For more background, see Adam Isacson, "How Colombia's Lopsided Approach to Security Makes Colombians Less Safe" (from the Spanish version), *Razón Pública*, September 19, 2022.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; McColl, "Colombia's President."

⁴⁰ CRS communication with Colombian Embassy to the United States, November 2022.

⁴¹ Freeman, "Can Petro Pull Off 'Total Peace?'" ; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Colombia: Country Report*, January 2023; R. Evan Ellis, "Colombia's Security Challenges"; and Luis Fernando Mejía, "Colombia's Growth Is Slowing; Imperiling Gustavo Petro's Agenda," *Americas Quarterly*, February 13, 2023.

⁴² The Department of State Authorities Act, Fiscal Year 2017 (P.L. 114-323, Title VI).

⁴³ Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, "Executive Summary," in *Report of the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission*, December 2020, pp. 1-4.

support for building tertiary roads, strengthening Colombian land titling efforts, and enhancing law enforcement for effective rural development.⁴⁴

Congress continues to address America's illicit drug problem. In FY2023 foreign aid appropriations legislation (P.L. 117-328),⁴⁵

Congress directed the Secretary of State to report to Congress, within four months of enactment, on prior counternarcotics initiatives in the Western Hemisphere and their results (with accompanying lessons learned from successes and

failures). The law also required a review of how the current U.S.-Colombia counternarcotics strategy, released by the Administration in October 2021,⁴⁶ has incorporated such lessons, as well as a review of the strategy's goals and anticipated outcomes. This directive will give the Secretary of State an opportunity to report on the State Department's assessment of the Petro Administration's proposed counternarcotics approach, and its convergence with the latest strategic planning by the United States.

Congress also has appropriated funds to support the U.S.-Colombia partnership in its annual foreign assistance appropriations, often exceeding the U.S. Administration's budget requests. Colombia has received the largest cumulative amount of U.S. foreign aid in the region, and it continues to host the largest USAID mission in Latin America.⁴⁷ Any changes in the bilateral security relationship may invite a reassessment of foreign assistance levels to Colombia.

Congressional appropriations to the U.S. Departments of State and Defense provide security assistance in Colombia (see textbox). Both the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act (FY2022 NDAA; P.L. 117-81) and the FY2023 James M. Inhofe NDAA (P.L. 117-263) contained provisions on Colombia. The FY2022 NDAA included a provision that extended authority to support a unified counterdrug and counterterrorism campaign in Colombia, and the FY2023 NDAA extended that authority through 2025. The FY2023 NDAA also mandated an annual report assessing the threat to Colombia from trafficking and designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).

The Petro Administration has indicated it welcomes U.S. programs to continue, including economic development programs; peace accord support; and a set-aside for programs for ethnic Colombians facing inequities, such as Indigenous communities and Afro-Colombians, as well as support for climate change adaptation and environmental conservation.⁴⁸ Potentially less certain

Scope of U.S. Security Assistance to Colombia

U.S. foreign assistance has been aimed at increasing the professionalism of the Colombian National Police (CNP) and Colombia's military. The State Department has employed counternarcotics funding to assist Colombia with drug laboratory dismantlement and justice sector and investigatory capacity building, generally for the CNP and its counternarcotics police. The Department of Defense (DOD) supports bilateral and regional counterdrug activities and leads joint and maritime operations to monitor and detect illicit drug flows. Between FY2016 and FY2018, DOD-funded programs aimed at counternarcotics and security goals averaged \$70 million per year. Other security assistance has included Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, De-mining, and Related Programs (NADR), recently concentrated on removal of anti-personnel explosives laid mainly by the FARC. Assistance also includes USAID development programs funded through the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁴⁵ In the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328, Division K), of December 29, 2022, Congress provided \$487.4 million in bilateral assistance to Colombia.

⁴⁶ White House, "The White House Releases Details of the New, Holistic U.S.-Colombia Counternarcotics Strategy," press release, October 25, 2021.

⁴⁷ For more background, see CRS Report R47028, *U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2022 Appropriations*, by Peter J. Meyer.

⁴⁸ In-person briefing by Colombian Minister of Interior, Alfonso Prados, and Colombian Ambassador to the United

based on announced program goals, but not so far on implemented changes, is continued support for all counternarcotics programs, some of which are funded through the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) account, managed by State Department. INCLE funds also promote justice reform, human rights protection, and complementary counterterrorism efforts, all programming that appears aligned to Petro administration announced objectives.

According to the FY2023 foreign assistance legislation regarding bilateral aid to Colombia, Congress included a restriction on the obligation of 20% of INCLE funding, requiring the Secretary of State to certify multiple factors.⁴⁹ Congress conditioned another 5% of INCLE funding for the Colombian National Police (CNP) on a human rights certification requirement that Colombia is seeking justice for police found to have used excessive force or committed other human rights abuses against protesters in 2020 and 2021.

Outlook

One approach to assessing the Petro government's potential redirection of the U.S.-Colombia relationship is to consider how the partnership was formed and has endured. The mutual security goals that bound together the U.S. and Colombian governments, beginning with the U.S. reaction to the 1980s-1990s domestic crack epidemic and Colombian leaders' conclusion that Colombia's narcotics trade was destabilizing its democracy, arguably were foundational to the relationship. Some analysts maintain that the Petro government remains committed to a partnership with the United States founded on shared commitments to peace and security, equitable economic development, environmental protection, and respect for human rights.⁵⁰ Other analysts have questioned the extent to which elements of Colombia's Total Peace policy and warming relations with Venezuela reflect a significant divergence from common bilateral goals.⁵¹ Some Members of Congress appear skeptical of Petro's ambitious peace policies with armed groups and criminal gangs.⁵² Potential areas of tension may depend on whether or how Petro's Total Peace program and its corollary policies unfold. Some key areas that may be affected include the following:

Antidrug Programs. The Petro government's approach to antidrug programs may affect U.S.-Colombia counterdrug programs, which range from training third-country police and military in Central America and the Caribbean to joint operations to combat violent narcotics trafficking to joint coca eradication efforts and other bilateral interdiction operations. The decade-old U.S.-Colombia Regional Security Cooperation Program may continue but may be a lower priority for the Petro government than for prior Colombian administrations.⁵³ The State Department and the Biden Administration may reevaluate supply-reduction efforts and policies with Colombia, and

States, Luis Murillo, hosted at the Embassy of Colombia, January 20, 2023.

⁴⁹ According to §7045 (B), to obligate 20% of the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement funding, the U.S. Secretary of State must certify that Colombia is using a "whole-of-government strategy" to sustainably reduce coca cultivation and cocaine production, including activities that support drug crop eradication, alternative development, drug interdiction, and the dismantling of drug trafficking and money laundering networks. The Secretary also must certify the programs are in accordance with the 2016 peace accord.

⁵⁰ See Adam Isacson, "A Fresh Start for Colombia ... and for U.S. Policy?," *Responsible Statecraft*, June 22, 2022.

⁵¹ See, for example, Connor Echols, "Will Washington Blow Its Chance for a Fresh Start in Colombia?," *Responsible Statecraft*, August 22, 2022. See also McColl, "Colombia's President."

⁵² In July 2022, U.S. Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz introduced legislation to reimpose sanctions on the FARC. See Arnson, "A New Era."

⁵³ See U.S. Department of State, "Joint Press Release on the United States-Colombia Action Plan [USCAP] on Regional Security Cooperation," April 15, 2012. The USCAP program grew from 34 activities executed in 2013 to 372 activities in 2019. Although there were fewer than 50 activities through October 2020 due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic and restricted travel, the government renewed efforts in 2021 with 254 activities.

Congress may choose to reevaluate current levels of foreign assistance. The Petro Administration's "failed war on drugs" rhetoric also may result in major changes to long-standing bilateral cooperation. The degree to which these changes may occur remains unclear.

Amazon Preservation. The Petro government seeks to align antidrug cooperation with Amazon preservation, a matter Petro addressed in his inaugural speech.⁵⁴ Petro's emphasis on Amazon preservation as a global imperative dovetails with the Biden Administration's increased focus on the security consequences of climate change.⁵⁵ Some critics contend that emphasizing the environmental benefits of counternarcotics might shift funding and other resources away from traditional supply-control methods.⁵⁶

Containing Rural Violence. Estimates of 2022 killings of social leaders, human rights defenders, and other activists in Colombia exceed similar counts from the prior six years, particularly in marginal and rural areas.⁵⁷ The Petro government is starting collective surrender talks with as many as 25 armed and criminal groups in exchange for undisclosed incentives. If, and when, final agreements are struck, historical precedents suggest other organized crime structures (or FARC-dissident groups) are likely to attempt to take over the surrendering groups' territories.⁵⁸ The U.S. government has supported efforts to bring justice and law enforcement to remote areas of Colombia, but a patchwork of agreements or insufficient government presence may continue to stymie the shared U.S.-Colombian goal of ending violence in Colombia's war-torn, rural communities. Congress may consider whether to monitor progress of Petro's Total Peace policy and the degree to which those negotiations or surrender talks produce a sustainable peace.

Consequences of Negotiations with Crime Organizations and Current FTOs. In December 2021, the State Department removed the FARC from its list of FTOs and added two FARC dissident groups.⁵⁹ Going forward, Members of Congress may consider whether to track the Petro government's negotiations or surrender talks with armed groups and organized crime structures, including FARC dissidents. In exchange for disarmament or surrender, the Petro government may decline U.S. extradition requests for members of these groups and attempt to protect them against U.S. State and Treasury Department sanctions.

Binational Military Cooperation. Although Colombia's embrace of the U.S. strategic partnership may change, President Petro has demonstrated some pragmatism and a sense that he needs to maintain close relations with U.S. policymakers, including bipartisan support in Congress. The Petro administration may seek to sustain strong ties, if not the sort of preferential ties that occurred when the two governments viewed one another as the partner of choice.

⁵⁴ President Petro addressed several climate issues in his August 2022 inauguration speech. For English translation, see Progressive International, "The Government of Life," at <https://progressive.international/wire/2022-08-09-may-the-division-of-latin-america-come-to-an-end/en>.

⁵⁵ In the last quarter of 2022, 12 U.S. donated Black Hawk helicopters were given to Colombia to become part of an aerial fleet to protect the environment and combat deforestation and illegal logging. CRS communication with the Colombian Embassy to the United States, January 5, 2023.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Daniel F. Runde, September 27, 2022.

⁵⁷ United Nations, *United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/1004*, December 28, 2022.

⁵⁸ This occurred after major demobilizations in Colombia, such as the rightist paramilitary demobilization under the Uribe government in 2005 from which violent successor paramilitary groups emerged. Today several remain among Colombia's most violent groups. For more, see CRS Report R42982, *Colombia's Peace Process Through 2016*.

⁵⁹ Antony J. Blinken, U.S. Department of State, "Revocation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Additional Terrorist Designations," press release, November 30, 2021. The declared FTO groups are now potential negotiating partners under Petro's Total Peace program. On December 31, 2022, the government announced bilateral cease-fires with the two FARC dissident groups listed as FTOs and with a regional faction of the Gulf Clan.

Author Information

June S. Beittel
Analyst in Latin American Affairs

Acknowledgments

Research Librarian Carla Davis-Castro and former CRS Research Assistant Rachel Martin provided significant assistance for the preparation of this report.

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.