

Submitted Testimony by

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“Assessing the Colombia Peace Process: The Way Forward in U.S.-Colombia Relations

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on “Assessing the Colombia Peace Process: The Way Forward in U.S.-Colombia Relations.” It is an honor to testify beside my distinguished former colleague Mr. Jose Cardenas.

The amazing success of the U.S.-Colombia strategic relationship is a direct result of the longstanding bipartisan consensus in favor of Colombia that exists in this body. Indeed, it was thanks to the leadership and oversight of the U.S. Congress that the United States was able to provide sustained commitment to Plan Colombia through the years, and to continue that commitment by supporting Peace Colombia with \$450 million in Fiscal Year 2017 as the country works to implement a historic peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). As a Colombian American, it was this leadership that inspired me into public service, because it demonstrated the transformational nature of U.S. foreign policy when combined with Colombian political will. So, thank you for your continued leadership and for inspiring a young Colombian American to serve his country just over 17 years ago.

U.S. Support for the Colombian Peace Process

During my service with the Obama Administration, I served on the National Security Council (NSC) when President Juan Manuel Santos began to set the stage for peace negotiations with the FARC. By then, the United States had stood by Colombia on the battlefield for over a decade, so there was no question that we would continue our support as Colombia pursued a negotiated peace. From our perspective, supporting a sustainable and just peace presented the best policy option for the United States to achieve a strategic victory against the Colombian drug trade. Entering into negotiations also offered an opportunity for the government to delegitimize a narco-terrorist organization masking itself as a belligerent movement by separating its political component from the criminal elements.

As the Administration considered its policy options, it was clear that Colombia would continue to need our help with implementation if the talks succeeded, but perhaps more so if they did not.

Taking the long view, the prospect of a Colombia at peace also offered an opportunity for the country to fulfill its full potential as a regional leader and an exporter of security. Successfully addressing the domestic security situation would free up the government to pivot toward a broader international vision that included developing a 21st century military, establishing an active partnership role with NATO, achieving accession to the OECD, and increasing its already robust participation in international fora. Peace also offered amazing potential for U.S. businesses to benefit while investing in the broad-based prosperity of Colombia and its people. Without a doubt, supporting peace negotiations was the right choice for the United States and for the Colombian people. The modalities were another question.

At the beginning, we decided against joining the negotiating teams in Havana, even though both the Colombian government and the FARC wanted us there. We knew the presence of the United States would distract negotiators from the fundamental points of the agenda, including land reform and end-of-conflict. Instead, we agreed to establish the U.S.-Colombia High-Level Strategic Security Dialogue (HLSSD) in 2012 as a high-level mechanism to communicate U.S. national security interests and to provide the Colombians with a direct channel on matters related to peace negotiations, security challenges, and military transformation. It was co-chaired by the Deputy National Security Advisor and the Colombian Minister of Defense, with the participation of our respective national security Departments and Agencies. It was the first time since the initial years of Plan Colombia that the U.S. and Colombian governments were engaging at such a high level on national security matters and starting to think about what the bilateral relationship could look like post Plan Colombia.

Our initial focus was Colombia's revised counter-insurgency strategy, which represented an integral part of the government's efforts to lay the groundwork for negotiations with the FARC. Under the leadership of then-Minister Juan Carlos Pinzon, the government took the fight to the FARC's traditional safe havens and targeted its financial infrastructure to degrade its capabilities and increase the incentive for the group to negotiate in good faith for the first time since its creation. We made human rights a central part of every conversation, used the HLSSD to convey our expectations with regard to continued counternarcotics cooperation, and our respective justice counterparts engaged actively on matters related to extradition and transitional justice. We also developed a regional plan for cooperation in Central America under the leadership of Assistant Secretary William Brownfield and his team.

I left the NSC in 2013 to advise Vice President Joe Biden on regional matters but remained actively involved in the HLSSD up until 2014, when peace talks reached an advance stage and delved into difficult topics, including aerial eradication; and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. At that point, the locus of coordination on peace negotiations for the Administration shifted to the Department of State, where Secretary John Kerry took an active personal role. His decision to name Bernard Aronson as U.S. Special Envoy to the negotiations helped accelerate the talks by demonstrating to the FARC that while the United States stood with the government, it was also willing to listen to the other side. Aronson successfully navigated the difficult task of serving as the voice of the U.S. government while avoiding getting pulled into the negotiations as a party to the talks. He also, as Colombia's peace commissioner told the Washington Post, helped the FARC understand that the world had changed. The FARC had lost

perspective in the jungles of Colombia, and it was necessary to help them establish baseline realities about what was and was not possible at the negotiating table.

Implementing the Peace Agreement

Following several years of negotiations, the Colombian government and the FARC concluded a wide ranging peace agreement in November 2016, but the hard part is just beginning and there are already two serious threats against its successful implementation: the political battle between the current and former president of Colombia and the spike in coca cultivation following the suspension of aerial eradication. As Colombia prepares for legislative and presidential elections next year, the United States will again need to carefully avoid picking sides as it seeks to advance U.S. national security interests. In that context, the August 13-18 visit of Vice President Mike Pence to the region, with stops in Cartagena and Bogota, is incredibly important and could determine the course of U.S.-Colombia relations for the next several years.

I was just in Colombia, and had the opportunity to meet with Vice President Oscar Naranjo, Director of the Colombian National Police (CNP) General Jorge Hernando Nieto Rojas, current and former officials from the ministry of defense, and several of the Colombian presidential candidates. The meetings provided me with important insights into the charged political dynamics in Colombia today. And if I were travelling with Vice President Pence on the Air Force 2 flight to Colombia, I would tell him this:

First, the question of whether or not to follow through with the peace agreement itself will become central to next year's Colombian election, but that debate is already behind us. Much of the friction today between President Juan Manuel Santos and his predecessor Alvaro Uribe is politically charged, which detracts from what should be a conversation about how to address the valid concerns with the accord and its implementation. The diverging positions on those components of the agreement covering human rights accountability and the FARC's political participation are prominent examples, and should be addressed by Colombia's strong democratic institutions. But abandoning the agreement at this juncture would set Colombia back by a decade, significantly hurting the country's economic prospects and undermining U.S. national security. The focus of the United States should remain on ensuring robust implementation.

Second, the problem of increased coca cultivation is simple arithmetic: more coca, more cocaine to the United States, more money for Colombian criminal groups, but a return to aerial eradication is not the only answer. An estimated one quarter of the \$10 billion provided by the United States for Plan Colombia went to spraying coca crops when factoring air time, ground troops, the cost of glyphosate, etc. There's no question regarding the initial success of aerial spraying but it was always intended as a short-term solution that would allow the Colombian government to re-establish rule of law in the countryside. Perhaps the Colombian government's greatest mistake in negotiations with the FARC was to end spraying unilaterally in September 2015 without first placing responsibility on the FARC to produce results on voluntary crop substitution. That said, the Colombians are equally alarmed by the spike in coca production, and the focus of the United States should be to help them do it their way: through increased law

enforcement operations, rural development, manual eradication, and a focus on public health to tackle the country's increased coca consumption.

Third, the FARC must come clean with regard to its finances. Colombia's Attorney General estimates the FARC's fortunes to be somewhere in the billions of dollars, which the group vehemently denies. As a matter of policy, the United States should pursue every avenue to prevent the FARC from using its funds for anything other than upholding its accord-based commitment to compensate victims of the country's internal conflict. The United States also needs to do a better job of working with our regional partners to tackle the financial component of the drug trade, regardless of the currency. Congress should consider leading a dialogue with the Administration on possible legislative tools to strengthen the ability of U.S. law enforcement to tackle criminal financial networks.

Fourth, the CNP needs all the support it can get if it is to successfully fill the vacuum left by the Colombian Military. The CNP needs to hire and train thirty thousand more police personnel over the next ten years, but they will also need air mobility to project force throughout the country, the technical capabilities to tackle complex criminal networks, and a community-based approach to maintain rule of law in rural areas. Colombia's military is one of the best trained in the hemisphere, and the U.S. should work to get the CNP to the same level.

None of this is possible without the leadership and oversight of the U.S. Congress. I would urge the distinguished members of this committee to engage personally and often on Colombia, including visits to see firsthand the progress in implementation. My former colleagues at the Department of State and esteemed former counterparts in the Colombian government may not like to hear it, but conditionality on human rights needs to remain a necessary component of U.S. support to Colombia. Congress also should defend against any abrogation of U.S. law enforcement efforts related to Colombia – let us not forget the horrible crimes perpetrated by the FARC, including the kidnapping of American citizens and facilitating the flow of cocaine to our shores. The FARC may be able to enjoy the beaches of Cartagena, but never Miami.

Lastly, please continue to send a signal of bipartisan support for Colombia through the Fiscal Year 2018 budget. The President reduced the request for Colombia from \$391 to \$250 million, which suggests that the United States is walking away from Colombia. When compared to the billions of dollars spent in the Middle East every week, the impact of \$10 billion over the life of Plan Colombia represents a much better return on investment.