



“U.S.-COLOMBIA RELATIONS: NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO REINFORCE AND
STRENGTHEN OUR BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP”

HEARING BEFORE THE
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Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Cardin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to address you this afternoon on the critical importance of the U.S. partnership with Colombia. My testimony will focus on opportunities for deepened collaboration with Colombia at this critical moment for the country and the hemisphere.

Thank you for your longstanding, continued bipartisan support of the Colombian people and of Colombia—one of the United States’ strongest, most reliable partners in the Western Hemisphere and the world.

Colombia today is a success story of how long-term U.S. commitment can pay incredible dividends. Twenty years ago, many feared that Colombia, then-embroiled in violence, was on the path to becoming a failed state.

Fast forward and Colombia is now one of the greatest success stories, but one that is facing major headwinds. A peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016 is in the midst of implementation, but today faces new threats including those emanating from the deteriorating situation in Venezuela. Colombia faces two additional challenges: the flow of millions of Venezuelan migrants and refugees across its border and Venezuela increasingly being used as a safe haven for criminal organizations that threaten Colombia and the hemisphere. The support of the United States at this moment is pivotal: we must double-down to support our ally and capitalize on the broader potential of deepened U.S.-Colombia ties.

The new challenges—and opportunities—faced by Colombia makes it imperative that we advance a new, modernized blueprint for the U.S.-Colombia partnership. The issues of historical focus must continue to be addressed: security, counter-narcotics, human rights, among them. But Colombia is and can increasingly be a partner for the United States on issues ranging from trade and investment, to partnering in solving other regional challenges. Still, Colombia is at a crossroads.

The leadership of this subcommittee and the U.S. Senate will thus be imperative. It is for this reason that the Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center convened the second phase of our U.S.-Colombia Task Force, with the findings to be released next week. I thank Senator

Cardin and Senator Blunt for co-chairing this important effort. I will thus focus the rest of my testimony on three items that draw from our findings: Colombia's role as a strategic U.S. partner; Venezuela's multi-pronged impact; and opportunities to deepen and modernize the relationship.

Colombia as a Strategic U.S. Partner

The U.S.-Colombia relationship is one of the greatest U.S. foreign policy successes over the last two decades. The two nations have jointly worked together to create a mutually beneficial partnership that has successfully safeguarded U.S. and Colombian national security interests. Today, given rapid changes in the Western Hemisphere, our security, economic, and geopolitical interests are more intertwined than ever before.

The partnership is far-reaching. We work together to fight international drug trafficking and transnational organized crime, while promoting democracy, the rule of law, and economic prosperity in the region. Colombia also contributes security expertise in Central America, Afghanistan, and a number of countries in Africa and is NATO's only global partner in Latin America. Through its leadership in the Lima Group, Colombia is spearheading regional efforts to address the crisis in Venezuela, and will certainly play a pivotal role in eventual post-transition efforts.

Although the relationship is longstanding, the announcement of Plan Colombia in 1999 marked a sea change in the bilateral ties. Over the next two decades, the United States provided more than \$11 billion to aid the Colombian government to strengthen state capacity and institutions, decrease coca crops, and fight the FARC and other illegal groups that profited from drug trafficking. This model is one that should be looked at for replication in other hotspots. U.S. financial support and technical assistance were fundamental, but, in the end, Colombia contributed more than 95 percent of the total investment in Plan Colombia.

While the ratification of the peace deal in 2016 represented the opening of a new chapter for Colombia, it has also led to new challenges. Among them, securing and directing the necessary financial resources to implement the accords, expected to easily surpass \$30 billion. As well, although the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies notes that implementation is underway in 70 percent of the accords' commitments, uneven implementation is widely seen among the six pillars of the accord. An issue of great concern is the almost 300 percent increase in 2018 in victims of antipersonnel mines and explosive devices over the previous year. Also, the recent call to arms by Jesús Santrich and Iván Márquez, both former FARC commanders, marks a worrying new development in the accords' implementation.

The Colombia of 2019 is far removed from that of two decades earlier, making Plan Colombia one of the United States' most successful foreign policy initiatives in recent memory. We must protect this investment to ensure that Colombia has the needed support as it faces new challenges. Colombia's pivotal role as a regional leader in advancing security and prosperity means that Colombia's success is directly tied to U.S. success.

Venezuela's Multi-Pronged Impact

The political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is an external threat to Colombia—and to the Western Hemisphere—of the size and scope not previously seen. The regime of Nicolás Maduro is a direct threat to Colombia's peace and prosperity and that of the hemisphere. Maduro welcomes Colombian criminal groups with open arms and shelters FARC dissidents and the National Liberation Army (ELN) who engage in illegal gold mining and increasingly run their drug trafficking out of Venezuela. According to estimates from the Colombian government, over

1,000 members of the ELN are currently in Venezuela. Colombian criminal groups have used the safe haven granted by the Maduro regime to regroup and re-arm.

The freedom to operate in Venezuela has provided Colombian criminal groups with new opportunities to launch attacks into Colombia. In February 2019, twenty-two young cadets were killed by a car bomb at the Colombian Police Academy, an attack ordered by ELN commanders from Venezuelan territory. Last month Iván Márquez announced a “new phase of the armed struggle” in a video that Colombian authorities believe was filmed in Venezuela.

The cooperation between the Venezuelan regime and Colombian illegal groups seems to have increased recently. According to leaked Venezuelan intelligence documents, Colombia’s rebels are actively trained and armed in Venezuela, including in the use of weapons such as high-tech Russian shoulder-mounted antiaircraft missiles. Further, according to the Colombian newsweekly *Semana*, ELN and FARC dissidents are helping Venezuela to identify high-value military targets inside Colombia.

At the same time, Colombia is the primary recipient of the largest mass migration in Latin America’s recent history. With 1.4 million Venezuelan migrants in its territory as of June 2019, Colombia is the primary destination for Venezuelans. Estimates from Colombian migration authorities project that in a moderate scenario, up to 2.5 million Venezuelans could be living in Colombia by year end. That number could reach as high as 3.5 million Venezuelans—an unprecedented wave of migrants and refugees by global standards.

President Iván Duque has adopted a policy of complete solidarity toward Venezuelan migrants, providing medical care, housing and public education, among other services.

In the last two years, more than 340,000 Venezuelans were treated in the Colombian health system, over 29,000 pregnant women gave birth at no cost, 156,000 Venezuelan children and youth were enrolled in publicly funded schools, and 62,000 Venezuelans had access to public protection programs and child and family welfare services. Recently, the government granted nationality to 24,000 children born to Venezuelan parents in Colombian territory.

Still, more attention is needed to prevent a regional public health emergency that could eventually reach the United States. Malaria, chagas disease, dengue, zika and other dangerous infectious diseases are prevalent in Venezuela and could rapidly spread throughout the hemisphere.

The Colombian response has not only been humanitarian. A long-term solution to the current migration crisis includes giving legal status to Venezuelans and integrating them into the labor force. Almost 700,000 migrants have received temporary protected status, which provides them with legal status and facilitates their access to legal employment opportunities, healthcare, and education. These measures are critical so that migrants can achieve economic self-reliance and contribute to the Colombian economy.

However, a regional consensus on how to absorb the Venezuelan influx is necessary and urgent. Recently, Ecuador joined Peru and Chile in tightening entry requirements, therefore increasing the burden on Colombia. This crisis is a regional problem and cannot be borne by Colombia alone. Colombia’s generous response to the massive influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees should be viewed as a model for countries around the world.

Naturally, the Venezuelan migration crisis is placing significant strains on Colombia's economy. According to the World Bank, the estimated economic cost for Colombia in 2018, not including infrastructure and facilities, reached 0.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), or the equivalent of \$1.5 billion. But the number of refugees has increased since then, and today the Colombian government estimates that the cost of providing health care, schooling and other services to Venezuelans will be 0.5 percent of GDP.

Additional international support is urgently needed. In the last two years, Colombia has received approximately \$150 million per year in assistance from the global community—10 percent of what is needed. Colombia has received international funds that equate to approximately \$68 per migrant—a drop in the bucket compared to the \$500 to \$900 donated per migrant or refugee from Syria, South Sudan, and Myanmar. A UN call for \$738 million from the international community has turned up less than a third of the money sought, with the United States contributing the lion's share.

The continued flow of Venezuelans to other countries in Latin America, and precisely to Colombia, is not sustainable. Fiscal costs will peak in 2020 as a result of Colombia's efforts to provide migrants and refugees with access to quality healthcare, education, housing, and other basic needs. These costs represent a major economic strain for a country working to implement a peace agreement and seeking to secure institutional control over all its territory.

A Deepened and Modernized U.S.-Colombia Partnership

The interests of Colombia and the United States are closely linked. The new U.S.-Colombia partnership should recognize this reality, and capitalize on the opportunities that this represents. The partnership will be further solidified as the United States supports Colombia's efforts to stabilize territories, foster rural development, and bring about a sustainable democratic transition in Venezuela. Economic and diplomatic ties will also be strengthened as both countries work together to support the eventual reconstruction of Venezuela and to advance stability in other parts of the region, particularly in Central America.

With the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA), the opportunities for mutually beneficial trade are enormous. The United States is Colombia's largest trading partner and Colombia is the United States' third-largest export market in Latin America behind Mexico and Brazil. Still, both countries must implement pending aspects of the TPA to expand market access and investment protections.

Additionally, strengthened trade and investment between Colombia and the United States will help to provide some counterweight to China's growing influence in Latin America. Over the last twenty years, trade between China and Latin America has multiplied eighteen times, from \$12 billion in 2000 to \$224 billion in 2016. Today, China is the largest trading partner for Chile, Peru, and Brazil, and, in the case of Colombia, China has become its second-largest export partner.

The future Colombian economy should also prioritize innovation and technology as well as linking human capital to rural development. One area of opportunity is for Colombia and the United States to expand educational exchange programs via scholarships, grants, exchange programs, and joint research. About 8,000 Colombians study in the United States every year—with an economic impact of \$302 million—and approximately 236 of them receive full scholarships through the Fulbright Program. Expanding opportunities for postgraduate training of Colombian students in the United States would make a direct contribution to the development of human capital and economic development in Colombia, which would benefit shared U.S.-Colombia interests.

A more modern agenda should also find new ways to promote rural development, build stronger institutions, and tackle the longstanding bilateral stress point, namely coca cultivation. Office of National Drug Control Policy figures released in June 2019 show a slight drop in coca production from 209,000 hectares in 2017 to 208,000 in 2018. Those numbers must continue to drop. President Duque has prioritized coca eradication and counter-narcotics efforts overall, with the expectation of a continued downward trend in coca cultivation.

Weak institutions and lack of economic opportunities in rural areas affect both Colombia and the United States. These conditions serve as the breeding ground for coca cultivation and cocaine production, illegal mining, and environmental degradation, as well as the strengthening of criminal organizations, all of which affect the well-being of Colombian citizens as well as U.S. national security interests.

Devoting the necessary effort and resources to implement the peace agreement is critical as is bringing to justice those who are in stated violation of the agreement and intend to return to conflict. To fully implement the agreement and devote the necessary resources to capacity building, local governance, and alternative economic development in rural areas, Colombia will need the continued support of the United States and international community. This is especially true in the midst of ever-growing fiscal strains resulting from Colombia's commitment to continue to support the growing Venezuelan migrant and refugee population. The U.S. Senate has historically risen to the occasion to provide resources at critical moments for Colombia.

The need to double-down on rural development is exemplified by the fact that many of the communities that believed the end of the FARC meant the arrival of the state are experiencing fierce battles between different criminal groups competing over illicit rents. More than twenty-five illegal armed groups, with a total of about 7,000 members, operate in the country today. The August 2019 call to arms by Iván Márquez reinforces the critical importance of meaningful reintegration of ex-combatants and attention to unmet needs in rural areas, which are the parts of the accord most behind in terms of implementation.

At the same time, although overall levels of violence have decreased in Colombia, a new wave of violence has been unleashed against human rights defenders, community leaders, and social activists. Estimates of the total number of murders vary across sources, but Colombia's Ombudsman's Office reports 317 victims from January 2016 to April 2019, most of whom were peasants, Afro-Colombians, or indigenous persons. Working with the Colombian government to stop such killings should continue to be a priority for the United States.

In sum, this is a critical moment to stand by Colombia. It is vital for the long-term interests of Colombia, the United States and the whole region. A strengthened and modernized U.S.-Colombia partnership involves deepening bilateral trade and investment, promoting rural development in Colombia, cooperating to find a solution to the world drug problem, and finding a peaceful solution to the Venezuela regional crisis. This multi-pillar focus will help catapult Colombia to the next stage of prosperity and provide the United States with an even stronger partner in the Western Hemisphere at a moment of great concern.

Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today. I look forward to answering your questions.

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