

Reinvigorating U.S.-Colombia Relations
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It has become almost cliché to laude the strength and depth of the relationship between the United States and Colombia. As that relationship nears its 200th anniversary, it is important to move beyond the trite and take a step back to examine its history, its status today, and its promise into the future. In that spirit, I commend Chairman Menendez for holding this hearing and for authoring the US Colombia Strategic Alliance Act. The legislation is an important signal of the abiding US commitment to the people of Colombia and comes at a critical juncture for Colombia and for US relationships throughout the Americas. The broad range of topics I understand is encompassed within the legislation is also a testament to the complexity of the US-Colombia relationship which profoundly impacts a series of US strategic interests in the Americas and well beyond – as it has throughout the past 200 years.

As one examines the US-Colombia relationship it is vital to appreciate that it long predates what many consider its high-water mark and which still others treat as its de facto starting point – Plan Colombia. The recency bias of a Plan Colombia-centric way of understanding the US-Colombia relationship is understandable even if unhelpful. One is hard pressed to find a more successful recent investment of US time, energy, and resources abroad than the role the United States played in Colombia during the past two decades. Colombian democracy thrives today because of the sacrifice of countless Colombians and the unwavering support of the United States. First, as Colombia sought to project the power of the state to the entirety of the Colombian territory for the first time in the country’s history and then as it executed a textbook application of counterinsurgency doctrine to bring an end to the hemisphere’s longest-running internal armed conflict through political means.

As Colombia moves forward, the Strategic Alliance Act gets it exactly right that we must shore up those investments and consolidate a cycle of success. The pursuit of core US national interests does not afford us the luxury of walking away from Colombia thinking our work is done. Now is the time to deepen the relationship, not turn our backs on it.

This is in part true because Colombia continues to face notable challenges. Recognizing the Colombian state has never managed to be fully present across the entirety of Colombia, implementation of the 2016 peace accords, which at its core seeks that elusive goal, lags the pace we would all like to see.ⁱ The need for continued support for the constitutionally required implementation of Colombia’s peace agreement is one of the reasons the US commitment must not waiver.

Colombia also continues to be plagued by flourishing illicit economies. Coca cultivation and cocaine production are at or above historic highs.ⁱⁱ According to ONDCP’s latest report, coca cultivation reached 245,000 hectares in 2020 and potential cocaine production 1,010 metric

¹ The views reflected in this testimony are my personal views and do not represent the views of any institution with which I am or have been affiliated.

tons.ⁱⁱⁱ Illegal mining devastates Colombia's environment and fuels illegal armed groups in Colombia – and in Venezuela – putting further pressure on communities living in Colombia's long-neglected periphery. Today, revenue from illegal gold mining is said to outpace income from cocaine production in Colombia.^{iv} As concluded by the bipartisan, congressionally mandated Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, on which I had the privilege of serving, the United States must partner with Colombia to take an integrated approach to creating the conditions needed to reduce the size and negative impact of these illicit activities.^v

The country continues to labor under the negative effects of the implosion of its closest neighbor and historical partner – Venezuela. Since 2015, more than 6 million Venezuelans have been forced to flee the chaos of their country's descent into kleptocracy and criminality, with approximately 2 million putting down roots in Colombia. Even before this exodus placed enormous strain on Colombia, the economic trainwreck imposed by failed chavista policies eliminated one of Colombia's historically most important and most reliable economic partners.

Colombia's economy has also regularly failed to deliver sufficiently for broad swaths of the Colombian people. Inequality remains a structural reality of Colombian society.^{vi} A pre-existing condition only made worse by the pandemic despite a significant fiscal commitment – 5 percent of GDP – by the Colombian government in an attempt to protect Colombia's most vulnerable. Intervention that has been credited with softening COVID's impact on Colombia's economy and opening way to a stronger than expected 2021 recovery.^{vii}

Colombia, like too many of our neighbors throughout the Americas, is burdened by stiflingly high levels of informality and the economic distortions that flow from it. Throughout the decade leading into the pandemic, for example, informality stayed stubbornly above 60 percent.^{viii} It is a country in need of fiscal, labor, and pension reforms and expanded investment in human capital to position its economy for success into the 21st Century. Reforms needed to fully maximize the talent and transformative capacity of Colombia's modern entrepreneurs embodied in success stories like Rappi – among Latin America's burgeoning tech unicorns – as well as in the embrace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution by cities like Medellin, in a way that addresses ongoing concerns with the gig economy and lifts the labor force. Sadly, such reforms have proven politically elusive in recent years.

Colombia also finds itself at a crossroads in the wake of its peace agreement with the FARC. The past years have seen a country – and particularly its political class – struggling to find a path forward, to define a new north star and avoid lapsing into traditional divisions, albeit with new labels, that throughout its history have dragged Colombia from one internal conflict to the next.

Although the hard work of defining and pursuing that new north star rests with the Colombian people and their leaders, a new strategic alliance between the United States and Colombia can help break that cycle. It can both serve as a catalyst for a more just Colombia and advance key US national interests by anchoring US policy in the Americas writ large.

It would not be the first time the US-Colombia relationship played an outsized role in advancing US interests and shaping US policy in the Americas. Shortly after laying out his “Good Neighbor” policy, President Franklin Roosevelt became the first sitting US President to visit

South America when he toured Cartagena in the company of Colombian President Enrique Olaya Herrera.^{ix} During World War II, Colombia joined the United States in declaring war against the Axis Powers; Colombian naval assets helped hunt German U-boats in the Caribbean; and the US Navy prepared for its Pacific Campaign off Colombia's west coast.^x

After World War II, Colombia was instrumental in establishing the world's oldest regional international system – the Inter-American System. The Organization of American States was born from the Pacto de Bogota, negotiated and signed in Colombia's capital city in 1948.^{xi} The Organization's first Secretary General would be Colombia's once- and future-president Alberto Lleras Camargo. It was no accident that when President Kennedy visited Latin America to see the first programs launched under the Alliance for Progress, he visited then-President Lleras Camargo in Bogota in 1961.^{xii} Every US President since Ronald Reagan, with the exception of the last occupant of the Oval Office, has visited Colombia.^{xiii} And have done so in effective pursuit of US national interests and in bolstering a like-minded liberal democracy in the heart of Latin America. In short, the US-Colombia relationship has long, vibrant, and consequential roots, and has benefited both countries.

A robust partnership with Colombia is essential for the United States moving forward given the central challenges facing the Americas today, including migration, the climate crisis, citizen insecurity, and democratic backsliding.

As members of the Committee know, the Americas are experiencing unprecedented levels of migration. In the past 7 years, irregular migration has accelerated as millions have been dislocated throughout the region. Understanding that successful migration management must extend far beyond border measures, the Colombian government – and, as importantly, the Colombian people – have stepped up to help their neighbors in need. President Ivan Duque's decision to grant Venezuelans in Colombia legal status for 10 years was one of the most commendable acts of leadership by any leader in the Western hemisphere in recent memory. Through its policies, Colombia has encouraged rootedness of otherwise irregular migrants, contributing to stability amid multiple regional crises. It has also set an example to be followed as President Biden did when he granted TPS to Venezuelans who have sought shelter in the United States in recent years.

Colombia – together with Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, the United States, and Canada – is critical to shaping and implementing much-needed hemisphere-wide efforts to mitigate, manage, and order migration with a focus on supporting migrant-receiving communities throughout the region. To that end, Colombia's regularization efforts together with international backing like the November 2021 \$800 million loan from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to Colombia conditioned on integration efforts need to be replicated and refined to local circumstances throughout the hemisphere.

Colombia is also a critical player in responding to the climate crisis and leading the energy transformation in the Americas. Colombia's unparalleled biodiversity is a wellspring of hope and opportunity for our planet. One the United States should work to protect and preserve. As an Amazonian country, Colombia is an important partner in climate diplomacy at a time when countries like Brazil imperil our planet through anti-science denialism. Despite an unsustainable-

over-time reliance on hydrocarbon exports, Colombia's domestic energy matrix is one of the hemisphere's cleanest with more than 70 percent of the country's electricity coming from hydro. And thanks to a rapid acceleration of installed renewable capacity – it is in the midst of an expansion from 50 MW in installed capacity in 2018 to 2,500 MW by the end of this year – it is growing more sustainable by the day.^{xiv}

Citizen insecurity remains a profound challenge in Colombia, although the nature of the security threat has changed in recent decades. As a result of enormous sacrifice by Colombians – and yes, the catalytic support of the United States, in the form of Plan Colombia – Colombia no longer faces an existential threat to the state from illegal armed groups. It does however continue to face a significant challenge. Homicide rates in 2021 were at a 7 year high and far too many community leaders are falling victim to the power vacuums created in the wake of the peace agreement in a tragic replay of some of the darkest periods in Colombia's modern history.^{xv} The country's security structures have been slow to adapt to Colombia's new reality and struggle to maintain the ability to project state authority throughout Colombia's territory and safeguard citizen security on a day-to-day basis. Other critical rule of law institutions have not yet achieved the operational capacity needed to ensure access to effective justice at all levels of Colombian society. Despite these challenges – and in some cases paradoxically because of them – Colombia has been and should remain an important US security and citizen security partner.

Democracy is under enormous pressure throughout the Americas. In fact, in its 2021 report, The Economist's Intelligence Unit found that Latin America's democracy index score not only dropped for the sixth consecutive year but also experienced the most dramatic decline of any region in any year since the Democracy Index debuted in 2006.^{xvi} As governments, even before the pandemic, struggled to meet the needs and expectations of their populations and public policy struggled to rise to the challenges posed by the accelerating effects of technology on traditional work, space has opened across the Americas for corrosive populism of every ideology.

Colombia has not been immune to these dynamics as disaffection with democracy is on the rise and popular unrest has manifest in sustained protests – both before and during the pandemic. According to the benchmark *Latinobarometro* public opinion survey, for example, Colombia experienced one of the region's most pronounced declines in faith in democracy – 11 points between 2018 and 2020.^{xvii} With only a brief lapse in the mid-20th Century, Colombia has been a steadfast defender of democracy throughout the hemisphere. Continued US support for Colombia and the Colombian people is an important bulwark against potential democratic backsliding. It is why the Biden Administration's provision of 6 million vaccine doses to Colombia should be understood for what it was – important support for the vibrancy of Colombia's democracy. Fueled in part by those donations, Colombia's vaccine program was more successful than anticipated and helped make possible a surprisingly robust economic recovery in 2021. In short, it helped Colombian democracy deliver.

It did so at a critical juncture because as we all know, Colombians will soon go to the polls. First on March 13 to elect a new Congress and select candidates from several coalitions to face off in Colombia's presidential election at the end of May. A first round likely to lead to a runoff between the top two vote getters in June. It is of critical importance that everything possible be

done by Colombian authorities, candidates, and their supporters, in cooperation with the international community, including the United States, to safeguard these critical elections so they accurately and transparently reflect the will of the Colombian people free from outside interference and mis- and disinformation-driven distortions that have affected so many electoral processes across the hemisphere in recent years.

Against this backdrop and as this Committee and this Congress look toward the next chapter in the storied US-Colombia relationship, I urge you to seek to advance US interests by:

- Continuing to support implementation of the peace accords through expanding the effective presence of the Colombia state throughout the country's territory;
- Investing in a region-wide approach to mitigating, managing, and ordering irregular migration by supporting Colombia's efforts at regularization and integration of Venezuelan migrants – and efforts like it throughout the hemisphere;
- Finding those ways that US development financing can be catalytic in the transformation of the Colombian economy to best prepare it to deliver for the Colombian people into the 21st Century;
- Leveraging Colombian climate leadership in deepening hemispheric and global cooperation, including driving modernization in green financing across all of the hemisphere's multilateral development banks, for confronting the climate crisis;
- Supporting comprehensive efforts to rollback illicit economies understanding that even as the negative effects of illicit drugs in the US are less tied to Colombia given the intensifying opioid crisis in the United States, the threat posed to Colombian democracy is real and consequential for the United States; and
- Respecting Colombia's democratic processes and institutions.

On this final point, while it is unquestionably true that US interests have been well served by a succession of leaders in Colombia with an abiding commitment to democracy as well as market-driven economics, the most important thing the United States can do to continue shoring up democracy in Colombia in the coming months is place its trust in the people of Colombia. It is imperative that the United States and political actors in the United States respect the sovereign will of the Colombian people as we rightly expect Colombians and other members of the international community to respect the sovereign will of US voters in our own elections.

We should stand in unyielding support for Colombia's democratic process and institutions, not for or against particular candidates in the upcoming elections. Going forward, US interests will be best served by a Colombia that vigilantly respects democracy and builds a more inclusive capitalism that meets the basic needs and expectations of the Colombian people and fosters the conditions for innovation and competition needed for Colombia and the US-Colombia relationship to thrive into its third century. We should trust our friends and allies in Colombia to choose leaders across their democratic institutions who will lead along such a path. And we should stand ready to work with those leaders as we have done across the past two centuries to advance shared values and interests.

ⁱ Matrix, Peace Accords, and Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. "Five Years of Peace Agreement Implementation in Colombia: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities to Increase Implementation Levels, December 2016 - October 2021." 3 Dec. 2021 available at <https://curate.nd.edu/show/0c483j36025>.

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