

ESSAY **2**

CONSTRUCT THE ROAD AHEAD TOGETHER

The US alliance with Colombia is rooted in our shared values of democracy, transparency, and accountability. We can celebrate this year's bicentennial by reinvigorating bilateral, bipartisan, and bicameral support for the US-Colombia partnership to ensure our region's stability and continued prosperity.

BEN CARDIN

Senator (D-MD), US Senate; Co-Chair, US-Colombia Task Force, Atlantic Council

FOR TWO CENTURIES, the United States and Colombia have maintained a robust and productive diplomatic relationship that has withstood economic fluctuations, internal and external conflicts, global crises, and political transitions in both countries. Today, the US-Colombia relationship is a key pillar of stability in the Western Hemisphere, requiring continued and unwavering multiparty support in our congresses and the sustained attention of policymakers, scholars, the private sector, and the people of both countries.

As a primary strategic partner in Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia will undoubtedly remain an indispensable ally for the United States in addressing regional and global needs. Our historical record of success demonstrates how US-Colombia collaboration could help usher in a new era, bringing important and tangible benefits for our nations.

As we contemplate new directions for the US-Colombia partnership, our two countries have the opportunity to renew our joint efforts and strive for a healthier future post COVID-19—bringing inclusive economic growth, increased security, more robust solutions to climate and environmental challenges, and a greater commitment to democracy, rule of law, peace, and human rights.

A healthier future post-COVID-19

The last two years are a testament to the importance of close coordination with allies in addressing transnational health challenges. US support for Colombia's efforts to recover from COVID-19 contributed to a healthier future in the Americas and provided a blueprint to prepare our hemisphere for other health crises.

The Atlantic Council's US-Colombia Task Force, which I co-chair alongside my friend and colleague Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri, laid out a four-pillar strategy in December 2021 for further policy actions the US-Colombia partnership could take to accelerate inclusive and sustainable COVID-19 recovery in Colombia.¹ That strategy includes not only accelerating vaccine rollout but also promoting investment and job creation, strengthening Colombia's social compact, and enhancing the rule of law, peace-agreement implementation, good governance, and human rights protections.

Our support for Colombia's fight against COVID-19 has not only benefited Colombians, but may also help the United States usher in solutions for bolstering supply chain resilience, addressing information gaps to enhance vaccine confidence, and learning lessons that will help us all prepare for future crises—all priorities discussed at the US Department of State's February 2022 COVID-19 Global Action Meeting.² We will continue the fight against this pandemic to secure a healthier future for our citizens and the hemisphere.

Inclusive, sustainable economic growth

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the power of innovation and resilience in the face of economic downturns, leading to major changes in how we work and live, including the emergence of a more digital-

ly-engaged workforce. The United States, working with Colombia, could be at the forefront of ushering in economic prosperity driven by values of transparency, accountability, and inclusion.

Our countries have a rich history of economic cooperation, and 2022 marks the tenth anniversary of the US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. This agreement has helped generate thousands of US jobs, expand US access to markets, and enhance US competitiveness on the world stage. The agreement eliminated tariffs and various barriers to US exports, promoting greater trade and economic growth in both countries. It also opened up a new world for US service providers looking to do business in Colombia. The agreement is expected to continue to provide positive advantages for US businesses and consumers.

Colombia has leveraged its excellent trade partnership with the United States to secure Free Trade Agreements with the European Union, Canada, and twenty-six nations in Latin America and the Caribbean.³ In addition, as nearshoring manufacturing becomes a possible alternative to trade with Asia in the wake of the pandemic, US-Colombian trade could expand further.

As China increases its engagement with Latin America, US-Colombia collaboration could help bolster a rules-based economic environment in the Americas. Colombia remains one of the few countries in the region that trades more with the United States than China; 26 percent of its total trade is with the United States. Through its commitment to improving transparency, anti-corruption, financial sustainability, labor protections, and environmental preservation standards, Colombia could set the tone for the wider region.

Regional security and Peace Colombia

Few countries in the Western Hemisphere have faced the array of security challenges Colombia has encountered, including illegal armed groups financially sustained by illicit economies, internal insecurity, and an influx of two million migrants and refugees from Venezuela. Under Plan Colombia and Peace Colombia, our nations have forged a steadfast partnership that is a force-multiplier for promoting accountability, combating drug trafficking and organized crime, and supporting human rights across the hemisphere.

President Joseph R. Biden announced in March 2022 that the United States intends to designate Colombia as a Major non-NATO Ally: “In recognition of our uniquely close cooperation in the hemisphere, Colombia’s significant contributions as a NATO Global Partner, its commitment to NATO’s mission to promote democratic values and commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes, and its rejection of Russia’s unprovoked and unjustifiable aggression against Ukraine.”⁴ This is a move that I anticipate a broad bipartisan consensus in Congress will support. Colombia continues to aid in the global fight against terrorism, cybersecurity threats, corruption, and other global security challenges. Colombia’s strong, albeit complex, history in combating armed groups and insurgencies within its borders uniquely positions it as a critical ally in training police, military, and prosecutors via the US-Colombia Action Plan and other mechanisms for joint operations.

Robust solutions to climate and environmental challenges

Dealing with climate change is a national security priority for the United States, and Colombia has been an exemplary partner in this effort. Environmental degradation does not stop at a country’s border, and neither should the fight to preserve our world’s clean air and water and natural resources.

Colombia has made bold strides to address climate change. The country’s Paris Agreement commitments include a 51 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and net-zero deforestation by 2030, and carbon neutrality by 2050. These go hand in hand with shorter-term goals, such as Colombia’s implementation of legislation regulating methane emissions from oil and gas. The country has also vowed to plant 180 million trees and secure a 30 percent reduction in total deforestation by the end of 2022.

Protecting environmental assets, tropical forests, carbon sinks, and biodiversity is crucial not just for Colombians but for the United States, our hemisphere, and the world. Greater US support for this joint effort remains vital to ensure future generations do not experience climate devastation.

An ongoing commitment to democracy, the rule of law, peace, and human rights

There is no area more important to the US-Colombia relationship and our world today than preserving democracy worldwide. As Freedom House recently reported,⁵ 2021 was the sixteenth year in which declines in democratic performance have outpaced democratic strengthening—meaning the world is deep into a global democratic recession. An ongoing commitment to democracy, peace, and human rights is not only a cornerstone of foreign policy but also an essential US national security interest.

Authoritarian actors such as Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela have contributed to the demise of democracy and one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world today. For the past decade, countries across the Americas have risen to help address mass migration from Venezuela. In this effort, Colombia has been a model for our global community.

With US support, Colombia has taken in and assisted nearly two million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, approximately 33 percent of the estimated 6 million people who have fled Venezuela.⁶ By January 2022, almost 1.7 million Venezuelans had begun the registration process for Colombia's Temporary Protected Status program, with nearly half a million fully enrolled, giving them access to health care, work permits, and other social services for the next decade.⁷

Corruption undermines faith in democracy and strengthens autocratic regimes by exacerbating existing repression and allowing violations of civil rights and liberties. Corruption is a fundamental obstacle to peace, prosperity, and human rights. We know this, and so does Colombia. The United States and Colombia should build on joint work to fight corruption in Colombia and globally and continue to partner to defend democracy and counter extremism. Initiatives to increase transparency and accountability that leverage new technologies and involve civilians could help pave the road to a more free, safe, and democratic world.

Conclusion

The US alliance with Colombia is rooted in our commitment to collaboration and the shared values of democracy, transparency, and accountability. The partnership is strong precisely because it is as wide as it is long, encompassing a range of priorities that affect every one of our citizens. Future US bipartisan and democratic engagement with Colombia in strategic areas will strengthen the entire Western Hemisphere. As our two nations cooperate on immediate parallel challenges posed by COVID-19 and other health issues, democratic backsliding and hyper-polarization, and the Venezuelan political, economic, and human rights crisis, we must prepare for future challenges. We can celebrate this year's bicentennial by reinvigorating bilateral, bipartisan, and bicameral support for the US-Colombia partnership to ensure our region's stability and continued prosperity.



Endnotes

- ¹ Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force, *A Plan for Colombia's COVID-19 Recovery and Why it Matters*, Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Institute, December 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/AC_ColombiaTaskForce_v18.pdf.
- ² Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "The COVID-19 Global Action Meeting," US Department of State press release, February 14, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-covid-19-global-action-meeting/>.
- ³ Government of Colombia, "Acuerdos TLC Colombia," accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.tlc.gov.co/acuerdos/vigente>.
- ⁴ "Joint Statement by President Joseph R. Biden and President Iván Duque Marquez of the Republic of Colombia, US-Colombia Bicentennial Partnership," The White House, March 10, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/10/joint-statement-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-of-the-united-states-and-president-ivan-duque-marquez-of-the-republic-of-colombia-u-s-colombia-bicentennial-partnership/>.
- ⁵ *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege*, Freedom House, March 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.
- ⁶ "Venezuela situation," UN High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/venezuela-emergency.html>.
- ⁷ Rachel Treisman, "Colombia Offers Temporary Legal Status To Nearly 1 Million Venezuelan Migrants," *National Public Radio*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965853031/colombia-offers-temporary-legal-status-to-nearly-1-million-venezuelan-migrants>.