

## ESSAY 15

# FORGE A STRONG DEMOCRACY

The US-Colombia alliance has achieved seemingly impossible feats over decades of close collaboration. Ensuring Colombia becomes a fully developed liberal democracy is the next step.

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**C**OLOMBIA STANDS AS ONE OF the United States' strongest and closest allies in the Western Hemisphere. With generous US support on multiple fronts and hefty Colombian investment and leadership, within 20 years, Colombia walked itself back from the brink of failed statehood and established itself as a vibrant middle-income liberal democracy.

The US-Colombia relationship is particularly strong from a military and public safety perspective, given the historical mutual focus on the war on drugs and relevant national security issues. The bilateral partnership is also strong in trade, investment, and diplomacy. Still, despite remaining internal security challenges, and even with notable successes over the years, such as destroying the Medellín Cartel and dismantling the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the potential of a US-Colombia strategic relationship with global reach is unlimited if developed fully.

The bilateral agenda in the next decade should focus on consolidating Colombia as a developed, militarily adept, liberal democracy capable of providing its citizens with a prosperous future and helping safeguard our shared

values in Latin America and beyond. A further developed Colombia would promote economic opportunities and job creation, while strengthening democratic institutions to curtail transnational criminal activities like drug trafficking and illegal mining. Colombia would also be better prepared to absorb migrants and refugees from Venezuela, preventing migration to and instability in other countries. A more prosperous Colombia would become a stronger partner to the United States and the broader region by deepening its already strong security cooperation, investment, and commercial ties with Central America. It would also contribute to holding back and even reversing the rise of authoritarianism in Latin America and could help deter the geopolitical ambitions of Russia and China in our hemisphere.

While fully developing Colombia is an ambitious goal, much progress has already been made. Colombia is a centuries-old democracy that peacefully alternates power at all levels of government with strong institutions and checks and balances that have proven resilient in the face of great challenges. Socially, seven million Colombians—about 14 percent of the population—moved out of poverty into the middle class between 2000 and 2019.<sup>1</sup> Although this progress was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recoverable. Economically, Colombia boasts the fourth-largest economy in Latin America, and its private sector is among the most sophisticated. Internationally, Colombia is a respected power with the most operationally capable military in the region. It is one of three Latin American members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the only Latin American Global Partner of NATO, and in March 2022, US President Joseph R. Biden announced the United States would designate Colombia as a Major non-NATO Ally.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Colombia must overcome three major obstacles to consolidate itself as a developed liberal democracy. The first, and perhaps most challenging, is ensuring that Colombia's democratic, free-market system responds to the needs and wants of all its citizens. Following significant reductions in violence starting about a decade ago, people's expectations of government shifted from simply reestablishing security to improving livelihoods, increasing employment opportunities, providing better-quality healthcare and education, and promoting social equality.

Despite significant socioeconomic advances over the past twenty years, progress has not arrived fast enough. Even before the economic setbacks

caused by COVID-19, more than 35 percent of the population lived in poverty, half the country's economy was informal, the quality of education remained below par, and there were still too many forgotten regions in the hinterlands where criminal activities thrived.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the significant reduction of terrorist violence made structural problems more visible, particularly public sector corruption at the local and provincial levels.

The government's inability to address these issues has progressively diminished trust in the democratic system and institutions. According to the Universidad de los Andes' *Observatorio de la Democracia*, satisfaction with the functioning of Colombian democracy has fallen yearly from 55 percent in 2012 to 19 percent in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Other national polls during this period show a grave distrust of institutions in all branches of government. Growing apathy toward the system has translated into electoral abstentionism, allowing corrupt political organizations to consolidate, particularly at the local level, further fueling the prophecy of a failed system. This distrust has contributed to the rise of a breed of populism that is both antidemocratic and anti-free market, which, if allowed to prosper, would render Colombia's full development into a liberal democracy unviable.

The second obstacle to Colombia's development and democracy is transnational criminal activities, including the cocaine trade and illegal mining—and the violence, human rights violations, and ecological devastation that accompany them. Domestic cocaine production hovers close to 1,200 tons per year,<sup>5</sup> up from 65 tons in 1993,<sup>6</sup> the year Pablo Escobar was killed.

Some estimate the size of the Colombian cocaine industry to be somewhere between 1 percent and 3 percent of gross domestic product.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> When adding the revenue of other criminal endeavors such as illegal mining, illegal logging, and contraband, illicit activities could represent double that number.<sup>9</sup> Add the proceeds from public sector corruption, and the number could be much higher still. In and of itself, this is a stunning threat to democracy as these funds inevitably feed corruption, violence, and human rights violations.

The state's inability to address this issue allows illegal businesses to thrive and corrupt public officials to remain in office, heightening apathy with the democratic system, which could lead to more corruption, further discrediting the state and pushing Colombia toward populism. These threats to democracy need to be addressed more aggressively in innovative ways.

The final obstacle faced by Colombia is geopolitical. State actors such as Cuba, Russia, Venezuela and, to a different extent, China—and even Iran—would benefit strategically from a destabilized or discredited Colombia. Weakening Colombia in any of these ways would be a significant blow to US interests in the Western Hemisphere and those of liberal democracies. Not only would a major ally be put under significant pressure, but it would also send a message to other Latin American nations that being close to the United States one day means nothing the next. Furthermore, a weak or unaligned Colombia could entice major powers such as Russia to act more assertively, perhaps by following through on their reiterated promises to base troops or strategic weapons in Cuba, Nicaragua, or Venezuela.<sup>10</sup> To countries invested in the region, Colombia's success or failure as a liberal democratic and free-market society translates to the success or failure of the US model in Latin America.

When Plan Colombia was first developed twenty years ago, it seemed like an overly ambitious proposition for an almost failed Colombia to recover from narco-fueled violence. It was not. The key to its success was having a set of clear goals coupled with US technical support and financial aid while empowering Colombia to lead the charge and allocate the majority of funds and resources necessary to accomplish the mission. We need to apply this same formula to consolidate Colombia as a developed liberal democracy. A task this grand requires a detailed roadmap but should, in any case, include:

- Security sector reform with the goal of increasing, training, and strengthening Colombia's police force to tend to all public safety and internal security needs (terrorist, criminal, and public safety-related) following the highest international standards, particularly on the human rights front.

Colombia's military should be transformed from an army trained and equipped for counterinsurgency to a force focused on protecting Colombian sovereignty and collaborating with international partners, including the United States and NATO, on defending the rules-based international order.

- Boost economic growth by designing and implementing an export-oriented growth strategy, including identifying and carrying out

reforms, such as tax reform; strengthening the educational system, particularly in technology and bilingualism; increasing access to capital; training Colombian suppliers to serve the US market, and attracting nearshoring projects of US companies that want to be closer to home. Initiatives such as the G7's Build Back Better World and US developmental assistance should prioritize Colombia to help bring its infrastructure up to par.

- The fight against transnational crime and corruption must innovate and evolve. An anti-narcotics policy based on eradication and interdiction alone has proven insufficient. Colombia's hinterlands need to be connected to the rest of Colombia and developed economically. We must more aggressively target the finances of drug cartels, illegal mining outfits, and illicit marketers of precursor chemicals. The US Department of Justice (DOJ) should forcefully prosecute public sector corruption in Colombia using innovative approaches such as those used during FIFA-gate,<sup>11</sup> the 2015 corruption scandal of global soccer's governing body, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). The DOJ successfully applied the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, given that many ill-gotten funds go through the international and US banking systems.

The US-Colombia alliance has achieved seemingly impossible feats over many years of close collaboration. Ensuring Colombia becomes a strong, developed liberal democracy will benefit both countries and further consolidate the realm of like-minded nations during uncertain times. We must seize the opportunity.



## Endnotes

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- 3 “Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population) – Colombia,” World Bank data website, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO>.
- 4 Observatorio de la Democracia, **Colombia, un país en medio de la pandemia 2020: Democracia e Instituciones**, US Agency for International Development, April 2021: 75, [https://obsdemocracia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/02\\_USAID\\_Democracia\\_2020.pdf](https://obsdemocracia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/02_USAID_Democracia_2020.pdf).
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- 10 Carlos Salinas Maldonado, “Rusia ofrece redoblar su ayuda a Nicaragua, Cuba y Venezuela frente a las ‘amenazas externas’,” **El País**, June 23, 2021, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-06-23/rusia-afirma-que-nicaragua-cuba-y-venezuela-requieren-ayuda-de-moscu-contra-amenazas-externas.html>; and “Rusia negocia mayor presencia militar en Venezuela, Cuba y Nicaragua,” **BBC World News**, February 26, 2014, [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas\\_noticias/2014/02/140226\\_ulntot\\_rusia\\_bases\\_msd](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas_noticias/2014/02/140226_ulntot_rusia_bases_msd).
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