

## ESSAY 5

# LOOK TO THE NEW COLOMBIA

Revitalizing the US partnership with Colombia based on a shared vision of a more prosperous, equal, and greener future seems like a more solid foundation for building out the next two hundred years of diplomatic ties than simply recycling the past.

**P. MICHAEL MCKINLEY**

*Former Ambassador of the United States to Colombia, Senior Non-resident Adviser, Americas Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Member, Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force*

**I**N TWENTY YEARS, Colombia became the most strategic and important relationship for the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean. The question is whether the United States fully recognizes what this transformation implies for the future bonds between our countries as we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of diplomatic ties.

Colombia is not standing still, nor, for that matter, is the wider Latin American region. It is not waiting for direction, engagement, or definition from Washington. As this book goes to publication, fifty million Colombians are set to forge a new paradigm for their country in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period when they vote in its presidential elections.

How the United States responds to the opportunities and challenges of a modernizing, sophisticated, and complex neighbor will determine whether the strategic convergence of interests in the Plan Colombia era was a moment in time or the foundation for a lasting transformational alliance of like-minded nations.

## Time to look ahead

**T**he concerns of yesteryear are not those of the future. In Colombia, that future includes, as in other parts of the world, a post-pandemic response that can lead to the necessary economic and social transformation in response to twenty-first century challenges.

In the United States and Colombia, the post-pandemic recovery also requires addressing the changing nature of globalization, the implications of China's rise and Russia's war in Ukraine, climate change, and the disenchantment of large sectors of the population with politicians and democracy itself. In Colombia, more specifically, there is a pressing need to modernize the economy, improve services, and reduce inequalities and social violence.

Washington at times can seem more concerned with the past and transposing its broader geopolitical objectives to the region. It is striking that Colombia is still primarily seen in the United States through the prism of drugs, left-wing insurgencies, aid dependency, and the continental struggle between authoritarian and democratic ideologies.

The US-Colombia Strategic Alliance Act launched by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2022 only underscores the enduring nature of this perspective.<sup>1</sup> The updated language on inclusive growth fails to disguise the US priorities that drive most of the bilateral agenda—security, China, Venezuela, migration, drugs, and terrorism. There is not as much reflection as there should be of modern-day Colombia's changing political and social realities or its national interests or aspirations for the twenty-first century. The text is restrictive about how Colombians should address internal questions.

The US Congress is not alone in its approach. The White House focused on many of the same concerns during the March 2022 visit of President Iván Duque to Washington. To realize President Joseph R. Biden's vision of the US-Colombia relationship as “the foundation ... of regional security and prosperity,” the agenda must be palpably broader and include how Colombians define their challenges, future, and region.<sup>2</sup>

## The new Colombia

**T**here is so much more to Colombia's present-day reality than "cocaine and war," as one of the Colombian creators of the animated film *Encanto* commented after its Oscar award win.<sup>3</sup>

I thought so when I was the US ambassador in Bogotá between 2010 and 2013. We worked on security and counter-narcotics but we also prioritized finalizing a free trade agreement that transformed our economic ties and included landmark labor and environmental protections. We supported a peace process that ended fifty years of war and is a model of conflict resolution in the post-1989 world, and deepened US engagement with Colombia's vibrant literary, musical, and artistic communities.

I think so now, even in the context of Colombia's still daunting challenges. No one should seek to minimize these. The mass protests and violence of the summer of 2021 indicated the strains caused by social, economic, and racial inequality and unmet expectations. The undercurrents of public discontent remain. There has been an exponential increase in drug production, implementation of the 2016 peace agreement is incomplete, political polarization is increasing, and Venezuela provides safe haven to narco-terrorists who attack Colombian soil.

But contrary to the almost universal dire predictions of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was raging and the country underwent its most severe economic downturn in history, Colombia in 2022 is defying the more pessimistic prognoses of where it seemed headed.

Colombia's leaders and people are finding a way to respond to the devastation of the pandemic and economic collapse. Colombia's completed vaccination rate of its population is now higher than in the United States, with far fewer resources and without culture wars. Colombia's equally remarkable economic recovery since 2020 is among the fastest in the Western Hemisphere and has taken place as headlines predicted a lost decade for Colombia and the region.

The ongoing economic recovery, which reflects Colombia's strong macroeconomic management, is only part of the story. In response to the hardships imposed by the pandemic, in which millions of families lost their incomes and education was severely disrupted, a reorientation is underway in the government's priorities—priorities a new government is unlikely to shift. Spending has dramatically increased to address poverty alleviation,

improve health service delivery, and transform education for Colombia's next generation.

Generally, there is greater urgency to the innovations transforming key sectors of the economy, focusing on sustainability and digitalization. Colombia's commitment to training 100,000 programmers and its emergence as a center for fintech and a home for start-up unicorns suggest the scale of what is underway.<sup>4</sup> The transformation meshes with public policies focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions at one of the fastest rates in the world. Colombia, one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, has scaled-up environmental protections during the pandemic response.

Colombia is also adapting to a changing world landscape in the trade arena and is positioning itself to benefit in the post-pandemic period. Colombia has expressed interest in becoming a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, which includes most of Asia's important economies.<sup>5</sup> It has trade agreements with the European Union and Canada and is a regional leader in pro-market growth and integration as a member of the Pacific Alliance, which includes Chile, Mexico, and Peru. Contrary to what many in Washington have feared, Colombia is managing economic ties with China without slipping into strategic vulnerability, and is preparing to benefit from the drive to nearshore supply chains in the region.

Colombia's democratic institutions are functioning in a period of great strain. The Justice Ministry is investigating the human rights abuses and killings that accompanied the 2021 protests. The country held successful elections for a new legislature in the most polarized political environment in memory, with all sides accepting the results. In speaking about current political tensions, my Oxford University professor, Malcolm Deas—considered the doyen of living historians on Colombia—recalled an observation he had made about the peace process: “no habrá revolución en Colombia, *pero toca hacer reformas*”[“there will not be a revolution in Colombia but reforms are necessary”].<sup>6</sup> If he is correct, and I hope he is, it will be the strength of Colombia's democratic traditions and institutions that proved determinant.

Poland's generosity to millions of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion has justly received massive praise in the West. The same recognition should be extended to Colombia. In early 2019, I witnessed in Cúcuta how Colombians welcomed and assisted families streaming across the border as

the Venezuelan situation deteriorated. With far less money and international attention, as the pandemic plunged millions of Colombians into poverty, Colombia set a standard for how to humanely respond in an orderly fashion to a major migration crisis.

## A new relationship

**I** have suggested why present-day Colombia merits an updated approach from the United States. In looking forward, it should be possible for Washington to provide one in a new spirit of partnership and shared bilateral, regional, and global challenges.

The Atlantic Council's US-Colombia Task Force December 2021 report provides the critical blueprint for doing so without ignoring the concerns that have previously driven our cooperation.<sup>7</sup> It makes practical programmatic recommendations for achieving the objectives of inclusive economic growth, a broader social pact, expanded outreach to Colombia's next generation, and further implementing the 2016 peace accords. It is time to use that report to forge our collaborative engagement in the coming years.

A new relationship also means a two-way street of strategic cooperation. Colombia may emerge as a voice bridging ideological differences in a fragmented Latin American political landscape. As a member of global trading organizations, Colombia is well-positioned to work with the United States to combat unfair and predatory competition and address the challenges of a digitalized world economy. As a major producer of hydrocarbons and a green technology innovator, Colombia can promote sustainable development and assist in a difficult moment for the world's energy markets. The United States could use its strong security partnership with Colombia to work more strategically to strengthen the rule of law in Central America.

There is more. As a country which has responded to a major migration crisis of its own, Colombia can help lead the hemispheric search for solutions not conditioned by US concerns with its borders. As a growing center of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), digital, and artistic creativity, Colombia can become a regional driver of innovation. As a democratic nation that has (so far) resisted populism, Colombia can exemplify how governments can meet the needs of their populations without upending representative democracy and its system of checks and balances

I cannot predict how Colombians will vote in future elections, and domestic politics anywhere can turn in ways that alter relations between countries. The promise of this moment, however, is evident. As the United States redefines its engagement with a changing world, a revitalized partnership with Colombia based on a shared vision of a more prosperous, equal, and greener future for our citizens seems like a more solid foundation for building out the next two hundred years of diplomatic ties than simply recycling rationales of the past.



## Endnotes

- 1 US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations press release, “Senators Menendez, Kaine Unveil U.S.-Colombia Strategic Alliance Act,” March 9, 2022, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/senators-menendez-kaine-unveil-us-colombia-strategic-alliance-act>.
- 2 Statement by Joseph R. Biden of the United States and President Iván Duque Márquez of the Republic of Colombia, US-Colombia Bicentennial Partnership, 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/>.
- 3 Joe Parkin Daniels, “Not just ‘cocaine and war’: Colombian pride at Oscar-winning Encanto’s positive portrayal,” *The Guardian*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/29/colombia-encanto-oscars-animated-film>.
- 4 “Prepárese: en diciembre se abre nueva convocatoria de Misión TIC,” *Portafolio*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.portafolio.co/innovacion/mision-tic-abrira-convocatoria-para-formar-a-personas-en-programacion-553772>.
- 5 “The CPTPP Enters into Force: What Does it Mean for Global Trade?,” White & Case, January 21, 2019, <https://www.whitecase.com/publications/alert/cptpp-enters-force-what-does-it-mean-global-trade>.
- 6 “‘En Colombia no habrá revolución, pero toca hacer reformas’: Malcolm Deas,” *Contexto*, May 13, 2021, <https://contexto.com/en-colombia-no-habra-revolucion-pero-toca-hacer-reformas-malcolm-deas/>.
- 7 Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force, A Plan for Colombia’s COVID-19 Recovery and Why it Matters, The Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Institute, December 2021, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/AC\\_ColombiaTaskForce\\_v18.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/AC_ColombiaTaskForce_v18.pdf).