

2023 REPORT:

ADVANCING US-COLOMBIA COOPERATION ON DRUG POLICY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

A publication by the Atlantic Council's US-Colombia Advisory Group

HONORARY CO-CHAIRS: Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Senator Bill Hagerty (R-TN)

WITH: Geoff Ramsey and Isabel Chiriboga





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Executive Summary** 1

- Introduction**..... 3
 - Colombia’s Role in the Cocaine Market in 2023 4
 - Security Trends in Colombia 6
 - Political Context..... 7

- Looking Ahead: Points of Tension** 9
 - Illicit Coca Eradication Efforts 9
 - US Security Assistance to Colombia 10

- US-Colombia Advisory Group Recommendations** 11
 - 1 Enhance international cooperation efforts to dismantle organized crime groups and bolster interdiction operations** 11
 - 2 Define precise and inclusive guidelines for the manual eradication of “industrial” plantations, while working to develop additional metrics to measure progress** 11
 - 3 Strengthen coordination efforts between national and local governance on rule of law and state presence in conflict-torn communities** 11
 - 4 Expand and strengthen US-led capacity-building programs for the prevention and detection of money laundering and financial crimes, with an emphasis on cyber-based illicit transactions** 11
 - 5 Advance the implementation of a holistic bilateral counternarcotics agenda through a careful balance of effective drug policies** 11
 - 6 Work with affected communities to develop an environmentally sustainable approach to transition to legal crop cultivation while mitigating further environmental damage** 11
 - 7 Advocate for the creation of a multilateral trust fund that can provide sustained funding for crop substitution and alternative development programs to curb the growing illicit drug-production trend**..... 11

- Conclusion**..... 17

- Acknowledgments**..... 18

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On September 7 of this year, the Petro administration presented a new strategy to combat the illicit drug trade in Colombia—at a time when illicit coca cultivation is at an all-time high. The strategy’s emphasis on rural development and on offering viable economic alternatives for illicit crop growers, as well as changing counternarcotics priorities in Washington, provide a set of new opportunities for US-Colombia collaboration.

The United States and Colombia have a thirty-year track record of collaboration on this issue. Yet there is still a long road ahead, especially considering the growing concerns over the proliferation of organized crime in Colombia and the region writ large. In this context, progress on US-Colombia counternarcotics cooperation will require a delicate balance between reducing large-scale coca cultivation and building the capacity of security services to disrupt organized criminal networks, as well as investing in the rural communities most affected by this phenomenon.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition in the United States that the illicit drug trade is a shared responsibility primarily

fueled by demand. Consumption and price for the drug have remained stable in the United States in recent years. However, the current trend of falling coca leaf and cocaine prices in Colombia present a natural incentive for coca growers to find alternative forms of income, which could result in a higher rate of success for alternative development programs and crop-substitution efforts if combined with a comprehensive law enforcement strategy.

The United States and Colombia should continue to collaborate closely to address the problems arising from the supply and demand for illicit drugs in this global context. This is crucial considering the emergence of new drug markets in West Africa and Europe, as well as the connections of certain trafficking organizations to fentanyl production. These dynamics, as well as the lack of state presence and absence of economic alternatives in many parts of rural Colombia, have created longstanding challenges for both countries. Moving forward, it is crucial that both nations align their strategies to make the most impactful use of US assistance. The recommendations presented in this report are meant to bolster the approach to a decades-old problem.

1 Enhance international cooperation efforts to dismantle organized crime groups and bolster interdiction operations. Under Colombian law, any individual arrested by a Colombian authority at sea must be presented to a judicial officer within forty-eight hours. In practice, this means that offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) must leave their station. During that time, there is a gap in maritime coverage. The United States can support Colombia by offering essential equipment and training to incorporate advanced technology into OPVs. This could involve leveraging video processing techniques to facilitate due process during apprehensions at sea, thus negating the need for the vessel to return to port, while ensuring the protection of the rights of the accused and full compliance with Colombian law.

2 Define precise and inclusive guidelines for the manual eradication of “industrial” plantations, while working to develop additional metrics to measure progress. In replacing coca and other illicit crops with other industrial-scale agricultural yields, several factors should be considered. These include the type of industrial crops best suited for coca-growing areas, the presence of an external market for large-scale production, and the fulfilment of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards overseas so that these products can have a guaranteed market access. To comply with these requirements, the Colombian government should promote public and private alliances to produce industrial-scale crops with SPS standards approved.

3 Strengthen coordination efforts between national and local governance on rule of law and state presence in conflict-torn communities. The Petro administration should enhance coordination efforts between the national government and local authorities. While the current drug and security strategies outline fundamental areas for progress, they can better incorporate perspectives from local government at the level of cities and municipalities. These include persistent budgetary concerns exacerbated by growing migration pressures and the need for greater coordination on the implementation of nationwide policies.

4 Expand and strengthen US-led capacity-building programs for the prevention and detection of money laundering and financial crimes, with an emphasis on cyber-based illicit transactions. Certain sectors, including banking, gold mining, legal advisory, and real estate are particularly vulnerable to money laundering. To address this, Colombian law enforcement, military forces, and intelligence units should enhance existing partnerships with their US counterparts to significantly upscale training and capacity-building with an emphasis on cyber-based illicit transactions. Special attention should be given to small financial cooperatives and credit providers, which are at a higher risk of unwittingly facilitating illegal transactions.

5 Advance the implementation of a holistic bilateral counternarcotics agenda through a careful balance of effective drug policies. The United States and Colombia should prioritize policies that will mitigate the escalating violence and security challenges Colombia faces. This includes enhanced cooperation efforts on real-time intelligence sharing on drug trafficking including routes, money laundering, and key individuals, and promoting advanced technologies for surveillance, interdiction, and data analytics to combat traffickers. Once the security situation is under control cooperation should focus on making those conditions sustainable through long-term social programs.

6 Work with affected communities to develop an environmentally sustainable approach to transition to legal crop cultivation while mitigating further environmental damage. The United States could be a key partner in accompanying the Colombian government in shaping the preservation of the Amazon, as it will require restructuring a portion of Colombia's debt to allocate the saved funds toward initiatives focused on forest preservation, sustainable land use, and community development. To achieve this, both countries can begin by collaborating on a detailed framework that outlines specific conservation targets and reforestation goals to then decide on the allocation of saved debt funds toward a combination of projects, particularly in areas with coca cultivation.

7 Advocate for the creation of a multilateral trust fund that can provide sustained funding for crop substitution and alternative development programs to curb the growing illicit drug-production trend. Colombia's new anti-drug strategy carries an estimated cost exceeding \$21 billion over the next decade. To secure international support and incentivize donors to contribute to the long-term success of crop substitution and an alternative development program, we propose the establishment of a trust fund led by a recognized international financial institution. Given that the World Bank has a proven track record of efficiently mobilizing resources through trust funds,¹ it may be best suited to leverage its extensive convening power on both the international stage and within individual countries.

¹ "Trust Funds and Programs," World Bank, accessed August 2023, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/trust-funds-and-programs#:~:text=Trust%20funds%20allow%20the%20Bank,development%20actors%20through%20partnership%20programs>.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational organized crime, and its penetration of state institutions, represents one of the fastest-growing threats to global governance today. Nowhere is this more evident than in the western hemisphere, where combatting the flow of illicit drugs and the influence of transnational organized crime have been a shared challenge for the US-Colombia relationship over the last thirty years. But with a relatively new government in Colombia and shifting approaches in the international community toward the issue of illicit drugs, there are growing questions over how best to safeguard and deepen US-Colombia counternarcotics cooperation. For that reason, the nonpartisan, binational, and cross-sector US-Colombia Advisory Group has convened to propose a roadmap for recalibration amid fast-changing global, regional, and local counternarcotics dynamics. Across the region, concerns over crime, violence, and insecurity have risen in recent years as a result of organized crime linked to drug trafficking. Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) have evolved and taken advantage of regional instability to leverage their well-established networks to adapt to new market dynamics and diversify their services, increasingly making inroads in new territory throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Colombia this dynamic has led to a growing sense that public safety is deteriorating, with the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) registering an increase² in perceptions of insecurity to 53 percent in 2022 compared to 44 percent the year before. The growing concern over organized crime in Colombia highlights a renewed sense of urgency for policymakers in both Colombia and the United States to act swiftly and cooperate to hone a more resilient and comprehensive counternarcotics strategy.

A surge in coca cultivation in Colombia since 2016 has contributed to market saturation, which has caused coca leaf and cocaine prices to fall. This has affected the livelihoods of Colombians in coca-producing areas, with rural coca farmers reporting an increasing inability to sell yields at a profit.

Meanwhile, President Gustavo Petro's administration has announced a new ten-year national drug policy³ that aims to significantly shift the country's approach to illicit drug traffick-



A Colombian anti-narcotics policeman stands guard after burning a cocaine lab, which police said belongs to criminal gangs, in a rural area of Calamar in Guaviare state, Colombia, August 2, 2016. REUTERS/John Vizcaino

ing. Petro has promised to prioritize the disruption and prosecution of large-scale drug trafficking networks, while avoiding the criminalization of small-scale coca farmers and providing greater opportunities for them in the formal economy. At the same time, Petro has presided over a decrease of 87 percent in coca eradication between January and May of 2023,⁴ compared to the same period during 2022, and some analysts suggest coca cultivation could rise to a record of 300,000 hectares by the end of this year. In light of these optics, both international and domestic actors are asking questions about the viability of Petro's approach. The successful implementation of the Colombian administration's ambitious agenda will likely depend on greater commitment to law enforcement cooperation, prolonged financing mechanisms, and heightened levels of international assistance.

In this context, progress on US-Colombia counternarcotics cooperation will require a delicate balance between reducing large-scale coca cultivation and building the capacity of secu-

2 Tatiana Munevar, "Creció la percepción de inseguridad en Colombia," *Infobae*, April 3, 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2023/04/03/crecio-la-percepcion-de-inseguridad-en-colombia-estas-son-las-ciudades-donde-la-gente-se-siente-mas-amenazada/>

3 Néstor Osuna, Camilo Umaña, and Gloria Miranda, "Sembrando vida, desterramos el narcotráfico," Republic of Colombia, 2023. <https://www.minjusticia.gov.co/Sala-de-prensa/Documents/Pol%C3%ADtica%20Nacional%20de%20Drogas%202023%20-%202023%20%27Sembrando%20vida,%20desterramos%20el%20narcotr%C3%A1fico%27.pdf>

4 "Al ministro de Defensa, Iván Velásquez, le quedó grande el cargo," *Semana*, July 8, 2023. <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/al-ministro-de-defensa-ivan-velasquez-le-queda-grande-el-cargo-el-pais-esta-incendiado-con-masacres-secuestros-y-el-narcotrafico-disparado-las-fuerzas-armadas-estan-huerfanas/202356/>

city services to disrupt organized criminal networks and the capacity of the national and local governments to effectively invest in rural communities most affected by the drug trade. Today, both countries face a rare window of opportunity. By building upon the most successful security and development achievements from the United States' \$12 billion⁵ investment in the Plan Colombia aid package, the United States and Colombia can make significant advancements in rural economic development, advance efforts to investigate and interdict drug traffickers, improve the rule of law, and modernize the capacity of Colombian security and intelligence services.

Falling coca leaf and cocaine prices also present a natural incentive for coca growers to find alternative forms of income, which could mean a higher rate of success for alternative development programs and crop-substitution efforts if combined with effective law enforcement and eradication efforts. At the same time, there is a growing recognition in the United States that the illicit drug trade is a shared responsibility that is ultimately driven by demand. It is crucial to begin moving the needle toward an integral drug strategy.

In the face of this opportunity, the US-Colombia Advisory Group of the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center is committed to identifying new ways for both governments to navigate existing challenges and to further cooperate to meet the changing context. This publication, based on multiple consultations with Advisory Group members following a closed expert briefing in July 2023, provides seven recommendations for continuing to advance a bilateral drug policy agenda that encompasses both US and Colombian priorities. The goal of this publication is to contribute to consensus building among key bilateral stakeholders by proposing innovative recommendations to strengthen cooperation on a critical aspect of the US-Colombia relationship.

Colombia's Role in the Cocaine Market in 2023

Colombia continues to play a pivotal role in the global cocaine market. Despite significant progress made over the past two decades, coca cultivation and cocaine production have been increasing since 2016.

The United Nations recorded a 52 percent surge in coca crops between 2015 and 2016,⁶ resulting in cocaine output of 866 metric tons. While the 2016 peace accords with the FARC⁷ included a preliminary crop-substitution deal,⁸ this unintentionally created a counterproductive incentive for farmers to cultivate more coca to receive higher crop substitution subsidies. Additionally, in 2014, the Supreme Court of Colombia ruled to prohibit aerial eradication due to its associated environmental damage and the detrimental health effects⁹ it caused on communities near coca plantations, which has limited large-scale coca eradication efforts.

These dynamics came together to accelerate coca cultivation in the last three years. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), there was a 35 percent increase in coca cultivation between 2020 and 2021 in Colombia.¹⁰ From 2021 to 2022, coca cultivation increased by 43 percent to 230,000 hectares.¹¹ This figure is expected to increase further in the remainder of 2023.¹² The multiyear increase reflects expanded coca cultivation and process improvements in converting coca bush to cocaine hydrochloride. Supply chain disruptions from the pandemic and the proliferation of organized crime groups likely also contributed to the current surplus of coca. The continued market saturation has seen coca prices drop by 60 percent in 12 months,¹³ from \$1.30 in May 2022 to \$0.52 per kilogram in May 2023. The dramatic crash in coca

5 June S. Beittel, "Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, December 16, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43813product/pdf/R/R47426>.

6 Sibylla Brodzinsky, "Colombia Producing More Cocaine Than Ever Before, UN Figures Show," *Guardian*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/14/colombia-cocaine-united-nations-figures>.

7 Spanish abbreviation for the Marxist guerilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

8 "Raíces profundas: coca, erradicación y violencia en Colombia," International Crisis Group, February 26, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/es/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/87-deeply-rooted-coca-eradication-and-violence-colombia>.

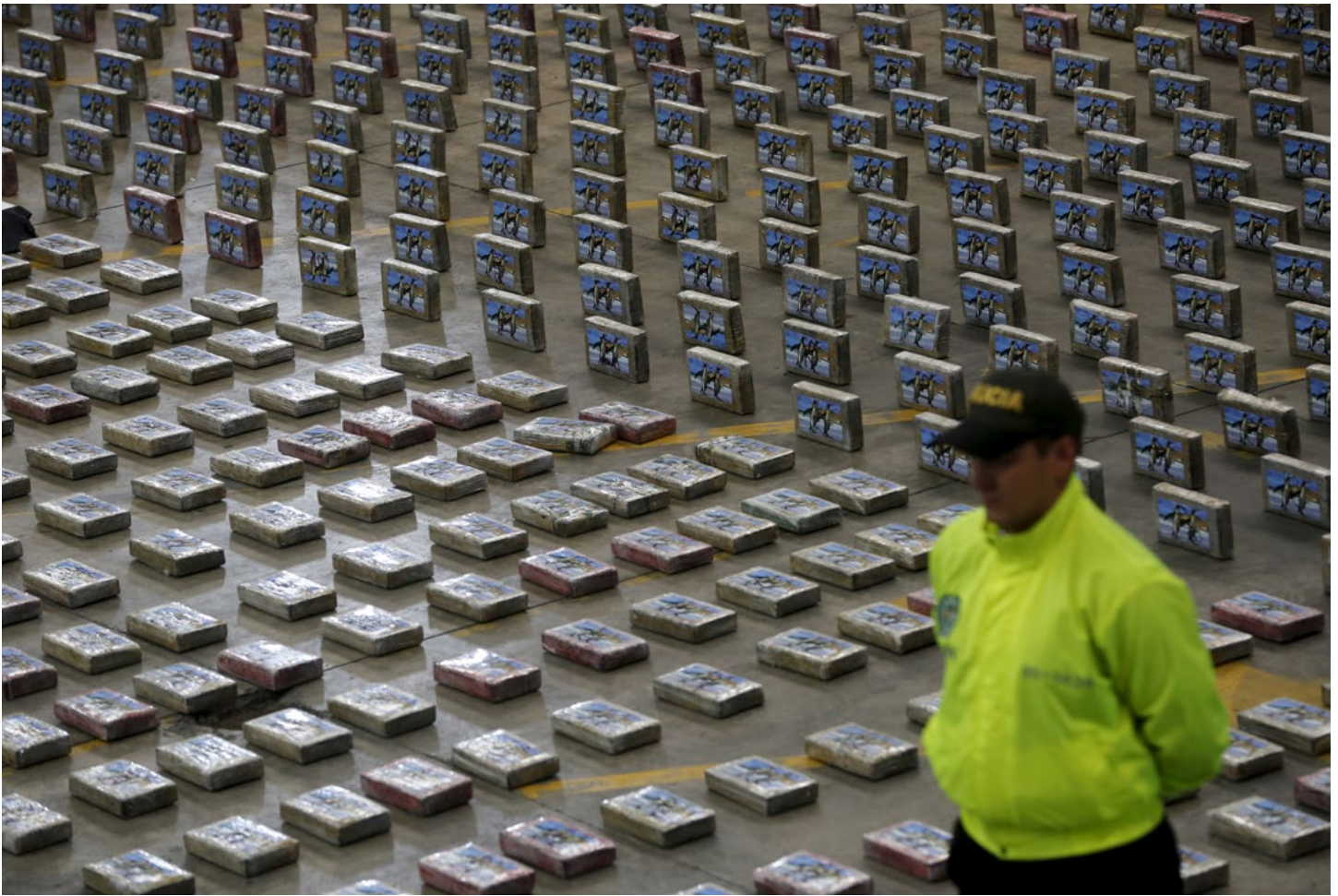
9 "Raíces profundas," International Crisis Group.

10 "Cocaine Trafficking Surges following COVID-19-related Slowdown," United Nations, March 16, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134607>.

11 Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombia's Potential Cocaine Production at Record High, U.N. Says," Reuters, October 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombias-potential-cocaine-production-record-high-un-says-2022-10-20/>.

12 Carlos Camacho, "Cultivos ilícitos: ¿llegará a Colombia a las 300.000 hectáreas en 2023?" *El Tiempo*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/gobierno/cultivos-ilicitos-llegara-a-colombia-a-las-300-000-hectareas-en-2023-745340>.

13 Juan Armando Rojas, "¿Por qué cae el precio de la hoja de coca en Colombia?" France 24, May 6, 2023, <http://www.france24.com/es/programas/econom%C3%ADa/20230605-por-qu%C3%A9-cae-el-precio-de-la-hoja-de-coca-en-colombia>.



A Colombian anti-narcotics policeman stands guard next to packs of cocaine at the police base in Bogota July 22, 2015. According to Colombia's police chief General Rodolfo Palomino, at least 800 kgs of cocaine were seized during operations belonging to "Clan los Usuga", an alleged criminal band in Puerto Asis province. REUTERS/ John Vizcaino

prices in Colombia has created a humanitarian crisis in the regions that depend on the crop for survival.¹⁴ This creates a key opportunity to incentivize coca growers to move to the legal economy; yet reduced prices will soon attract new buyers, inflating the price once again.

US law enforcement data suggests that demand from the United States has remained stable over the past two years with cocaine gram prices on US streets ranging from \$80 to \$120.¹⁵ Today, the United States continues to be the largest consumer of Colombian cocaine, which accounts for 61 percent of worldwide cocaine production.¹⁶ Yet global demand for the drug is also rising¹⁷ in new markets in Eastern Europe and Central and

West Africa, which have seen increased cocaine-related seizures and the proliferation of trafficking networks. UNODC officials warn that if consumption trends continue, these areas will follow the same fate as North America and Western Europe by becoming well-established cocaine markets in the years ahead. (See graph on page 48)¹⁸.

The dynamics and effects of the increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production should be considered when addressing the surging demand for opioids. This poses a significant challenge to law enforcement across the hemisphere. Colombian criminal entities do not operate in a silo; they are connected to TCOs whose influence extends from drug-producing countries to the United

14 Oliver Griffin, "Coca Price Crash Contributing to Colombia Food Insecurity, UN Says," Reuters, July 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/coca-price-crash-contributing-colombia-food-insecurity-un-2023-07-14/>.

15 Francisco Santos, "El entierro del Plan Colombia," *Infobae*, July 12, 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/america/2023/07/12/el-entierro-del-plan-colombia/>.

16 Santos, "El entierro del Plan Colombia."

17 *Global Report on Cocaine 2023: Local Dynamics, Global Challenges*, United Nations, March 2023. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf.

18 https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf

States. Fentanyl-producing TCOs such as the Sinaloa Cartel¹⁹ have played a pivotal role²⁰ throughout the history of the cocaine trade, and continue to do so today. The links between the trafficking groups could potentially result in fentanyl contamination across illicit substances in the supply chain, posing an additional challenge to the United States, Colombia and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Recognizing the severity of the situation, the United States has taken steps to modify its drug policy to combat the surging demand for opioids, directing increased resources toward education, public health campaigns, and intensified law enforcement efforts to disrupt illicit fentanyl production and distribution. This, in turn, can foster a more effective approach to curb overall drug consumption in the United States, including cocaine. Given the state of affairs, there is an opportunity for the United States to be intentional in addressing the fentanyl crisis as part of a broader regional US drug policy reform, rather than using the fentanyl crisis to model an overarching drug policy reform. Focusing solely on fentanyl may divert attention from critical South and Central American security concerns and their linkage to broader drug trafficking networks.

Security Trends in Colombia

Colombia is also grappling with increased homicides tied to the proliferation²¹ of TCOs within its borders: in 2022 the country reported 13,000 homicides,²² roughly the same number as in 2021, which was a seven-year high. This violence is heightened in regions most affected by drug trafficking and the country’s armed conflict, including Norte de Santander, Arauca, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Nariño, and Atlántico. Kidnappings have surged from a reported fifty-five cases in the first five months of 2022 to 144 cases in the same period in 2023.

In response, the Colombian government introduced a new security strategy²³ in April 2023 to improve the effectiveness of drug interdiction operations, strengthen intelligence capabilities of armed forces, dismantle money laundering networks, and combat illegal armed groups and large-scale drug trafficking while, at the same time, prioritizing the protection of human life, biodiversity, and the environment. The ambitious five-year strategy will cost roughly \$6 billion. Combined with the cost of the complementary drug strategy released in September 2023 (i.e., \$21 billion²⁴ over ten years), the Petro administration will face obsta-

Figure 1: Cocaine Seizures and Eradication in Colombia

	January–July 2023	January–July 2022
Cocaine seized	384,103 kilograms	423,109 kilograms
Coca leaf seized	553,880 kilograms	346,181 kilograms
Coca manually eradicated	9,408 hectares	45,296 hectares

Source: Colombian Ministry of National Defense, <https://www.mindefensa.gov.co/irj/portal/Mindefensa/contenido?NavigationTarget=navurl://2f76ade6e2220a74483af901e122f3fd>.

19 Elías Camhaji, “López Obrador insiste en que México no produce fentanilo y afirma que llega de China: “Tenemos pruebas,” *El País*, May 5, 2023, <https://elpais.com/mexico/2023-05-05/lopez-obrador-insiste-en-que-mexico-no-produce-fentanilo-y-afirma-que-llega-de-china-tenemos-pruebas.html>.

20 Joel Cano, “De la cocaína al fentanilo, cómo llegaron Los Chapitos a la cima del Cártel de Sinaloa,” *Infobae*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/05/01/de-la-cocaina-al-fentanilo-como-llegaron-los-chapitos-a-la-cima-del-cartel-de-sinaloa/>.

21 Juan Pablo Vásquez, “El terror vuelve a Buenaventura de la mano de nuevas pandillas: “A sangre y fuego los vamos a defender,” *El País*, July 4, 2023, <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2023-07-04/el-terror-vuelve-a-buenaventura-de-la-mano-de-nuevas-pandillas-a-sangre-y-fuego-los-vamos-a-defender.html>.

22 “Al ministro de Defensa, Iván Velásquez, le quedó grande el cargo,” *Semana*.

23 “Gobierno del Cambio presentó la nueva Política de Seguridad, Defensa y Convivencia Ciudadana para la protección de la vida,” Petro administration, April 25, 2023, <https://petro.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Gobierno-del-Cambio-presento-la-nueva-Politica-de-Seguridad-Defensa-y-Convi-230425.aspx>.

24 “La nueva política de drogas de Colombia busca transformar el paradigma hacia la protección de la vida y el medio ambiente,” Petro administration, September 11, 2023, <https://petro.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/La-nueva-politica-de-drogas-de-Colombia-busca-transformar-el-paradigma-hacia-la-proteccion-de-la-vida-y-el-medio-230911.aspx>.



A member of the police Special Operations Group (GOES) and army soldiers inspect an area where, according to the authorities, an illegal oil refinery for coca paste processing works in Tumaco, Colombia September 9, 2022. REUTERS/Oliver Griffin

cles with financing and ensuring the longevity of these policies. The relationship between these strategies and the 2016 peace agreement is still unclear. Although the Petro administration has been vocal in its continued commitment to the 2016 accords, peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) and other armed groups have raised concerns that the administration has competing priorities and has delayed implementation of the 2016 accords. These delays have allowed criminal groups to exploit power vacuums, increased competition among armed factions, and undermined security. In the first semester of 2023, organized crime groups assassinated ninety-two community leaders.²⁵ This is a battle that claims Colombian lives daily and one that has very real consequences in communities across the country and the hemisphere writ large.

Political Context

As the US House of Representatives and US Senate negotiate spending priorities and debate the logistics and parameters of aid to Colombia for Fiscal Year 2024, larger discussions are taking place about the role of US assistance to Colombia and the future of bilateral relations. Uncertainty about Petro's stance on a number of issues has led to deep debate over the future of the US-Colombian partnership. This includes concerns over the possibility of whether to cooperate with his counternarcotics approach, which frames the issue as a public health problem rather than as a security problem.

25 <https://colombiapeace.org/tag/human-rights-defenders/#:~:text=According%20to%20Colombia's%20Human%20Rights,between%20January%20and%20June%202022.>

ADVANCING US-COLOMBIA COOPERATION ON DRUG POLICY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

During his presidential campaign, Petro promised to design a policy to address the drug trafficking problem with a different approach than the one used by former administrations in Colombia during the last fifty years. On September 7, 2023, he presented the new strategy in an 80-page document titled *By Sowing Life We Eradicate Drug Trafficking*.²⁶ The strategy essentially seeks to generate incentives for small coca-producing farmers in geographically isolated areas to replace illicit crops with legal ones and create greater pressure on the financial structures of organized crime. To finance this strategy, the Petro government intends to use budget sources from the National Development Plan, but also expects significant international assistance.

The future of this strategy will face challenges in Colombia, where Petro faces a hostile Congress and deepening dissatisfaction with his administration as seen in the regional elections of 2023 where his party saw an important defeat — dovetailing with growing perceptions of insecurity. Beyond the escalating violence, recent high-profile cases of corruption have raised concerns around the linkages between political parties and campaigns with illicit funds tied to criminal organizations, further threatening democratic institutions and the rule of law. This trend will put Colombia's institutions and rule of law to a test as they become key components to fight TCO involvement in democratic processes.



A group of villagers prepares coca paste in a rural area of Narino, Colombia July 29, 2017. Picture taken July 29, 2017. To match Special Report COLOMBIA-PEACE/ REUTERS/Federico Rios

²⁶ Osuna, Umaña, and Miranda, “Sembrando vida, desterramos el narcotráfico.”

LOOKING AHEAD: POINTS OF TENSION

Illicit Coca Eradication Efforts

Petro has significantly scaled back forced eradication efforts, promising to target “industrial-scale” cultivation rather than small-scale coca growers. However, the Colombian government has not defined what constitutes industrial-scale cultivation, and illicit coca cultivation is at an all-time high.²⁷ The Colombian government has promised to roll out a large-scale voluntary illicit coca crop-substitution program, which will be implemented initially in 126 municipalities in ten priority departments. (See Table 1).

Meanwhile, thousands of families are still waiting on compensation and technical support after enrolling in the National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS) that was created following the 2016 peace accords. Although the program has experienced years of delay due to a slow rollout,²⁸ the current delay is mostly attributed to the change in government. A new director of the program took office last December and is still defining the strategy he seeks to pursue.²⁹

While substitution program implementation is lagging, the Colombian government and UNODC claim that past efforts have shown that forced eradication is ineffective; yet other

Table 1: Ten Priority Departments in Crop Substitution Program

Department	Municipality	2021 (Ha.)
Norte de Santander	Tibú	22.230
Nariño	Tumaco	18.110
Nariño	El Charco	8.952
Cauca	El Tambo	8.737
Putumayo	Puerto Asís	7.470
Norte de Santander	El Tarra	6.248
Nariño	Olaya Herrera (Bocas de Satinga)	6.041
Norte de Santander	Sardinata	5.135
Putumayo	Valle del Guamuez (La Hormiga)	4.694
Putumayo	Orito	4.422
Total (45,06% of total crops)		92.038

Source: Embassy of Colombia in the United States, security strategy document, private access provided by Embassy of Colombia.

27 “Colombia’s Coca Crops Grew to ‘Historic Levels’ Last Year: UN,” Al Jazeera, October 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/20/colombias-coca-crops-grew-to-historic-levels-last-year-un>.

28 Ana María Rueda, “¿Qué pasa con el PNIS en el gobierno de Gustavo Petro?,” *El Espectador*, May 4, 2023.

29 Rueda, “¿Qué pasa con el PNIS en el gobierno de Gustavo Petro?”

analysts argue it can be successful as part of a whole-of-government strategy.³⁰ There is also strong evidence³¹ to suggest that voluntary eradication programs can be successful if governments involve coca growers in the process, acknowledge their dependence on the crop, provide viable alternatives, and accompany coca growers in the transition process.³² This approach can help build trust and cooperation³³ within communities, potentially leading to more sustainable outcomes. Successful voluntary eradication efforts must prioritize a clear pathway for delivering economic incentives to farmers and implementing alternative development plans. Ensuring that these plans are attractive and feasible is essential for encouraging coca growers to participate.

US Security Assistance to Colombia

In July, the US House and Senate Appropriations Committees completed proposals for the 2024 State and Foreign Operations (SFOPS) appropriations bill—each of which presents starkly different approaches to assistance for Colombia. The House version³⁴ “deferred” a decision on assistance to Colombia, and voiced “strong concerns about the detrimental policies and relationships of the Petro administration, which are at odds with American security and economic interests.” The Senate version proposed a FY 2024 budget of \$487 million³⁵ for Colombia,

which is comparable to the previous year and slightly more than the administration’s \$444 million request.³⁶

As with all Colombian assistance, 20 percent³⁷ of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement funds are contingent on the US Secretary of State’s certification that Colombia is implementing a whole of government strategy³⁸ to “significantly and sustainably reduce coca cultivation and cocaine production, encompassing eradication programs, alternative development initiatives, drug interdiction, dismantling of drug trafficking networks, and combating money laundering.” For FY 2024 funding, this certification was verified by Secretary of State Antony Blinken on September 29.³⁹

As the House and Senate work to resolve differences between the bills, they will likely face the task of combining the Colombia assistance bill with several other budget bills into an omnibus or minibus bill (with either many measures or a handful of them in a bill, respectively). This will entail debate over the Colombian government’s commitment to addressing drug trafficking, security, and organized crime, and the role of US assistance for these efforts.

Given this context, the Advisory Group presents seven key recommendations for policymakers to strengthen bilateral relations through effective coordination that acknowledges national interests.

30 “The Untapped Potential of the US-Colombia Partnership,” Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force, September 26, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/untapped-potential-us-colombia-partnership/>.

31 Francisco Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs, Anti-Drug Policy Failure, and the Need for Institutional Reforms in Colombia,” *Substance Use & Misuse* 47, no. 8-9 (2012): 972-1004, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/10826084.2012.663287>.

32 Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs.”

33 Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs.”

34 State Department Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2024, House Full Comm. Print, 118th Cong. (2023), <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP00/20230712/116228/BILLS-118--AP--AP00-FY24SFOPsFullCommitteeMark.pdf>.

35 “Aprueban 487 millones de dólares para Colombia en el Senado de EE. UU.,” *Semana*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/aprueban-487-millones-de-dolares-para-colombia-en-el-senado-de-eeuu/202318/>.

36 “FY 2024 International Affairs Budget,” US Department of State (website), <https://www.state.gov/fy-2024-international-affairs-budget/>.

37 June Beittel, “U.S.-Colombia Security Relations: Future Prospects in Brief,” Congressional Research Service, February 14, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47426>.

38 “Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023,” House Comm. on Appropriations, Chair Rosa Delauro (website), <https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/democrats.appropriations.house.gov/files/FY23%20Summary%20of%20Appropriations%20Provisions.pdf>.

39 Antony Blinken, “Certification Related to Foreign Military Financing for Colombia,” Notice of US Department of State, 88 Fed. Reg. 67420 (September 29, 2023), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/09/29/2023-21414/certification-related-to-foreign-military-financing-for-colombia-under-section-7045b2b-of-the/>.

US-COLOMBIA ADVISORY GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE BILATERAL COOPERATION ON DRUG POLICY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

- 1 Enhance international cooperation efforts to dismantle organized crime groups and bolster interdiction operations.**
 - 2 Define precise and inclusive guidelines for the manual eradication of “industrial” plantations, while working to develop additional metrics to measure progress.**
 - 3 Strengthen coordination efforts between national and local governance on rule of law and state presence in conflict-torn communities.**
 - 4 Expand and strengthen US-led capacity-building programs for the prevention and detection of money laundering and financial crimes, with an emphasis on cyber-based illicit transactions.**
 - 5 Advance the implementation of a holistic bilateral counternarcotics agenda through a careful balance of effective drug policies.**
 - 6 Work with affected communities to develop an environmentally sustainable approach to transition to legal crop cultivation while mitigating further environmental damage.**
 - 7 Advocate for the creation of a multilateral trust fund that can provide sustained funding for crop substitution and alternative development programs to curb the growing illicit drug-production trend.**
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1: Enhance international cooperation efforts to dismantle organized crime groups and bolster interdiction operations.

Even under the new priorities of the Petro government, the US Drug Enforcement Administration has given reassurances that law enforcement cooperation between Colombia and the United States remains strong at an operational level. This successful cooperation has been particularly useful in the realm of interdiction, where maritime routes serve as a major trafficking pathway in Colombia (Figure 2).

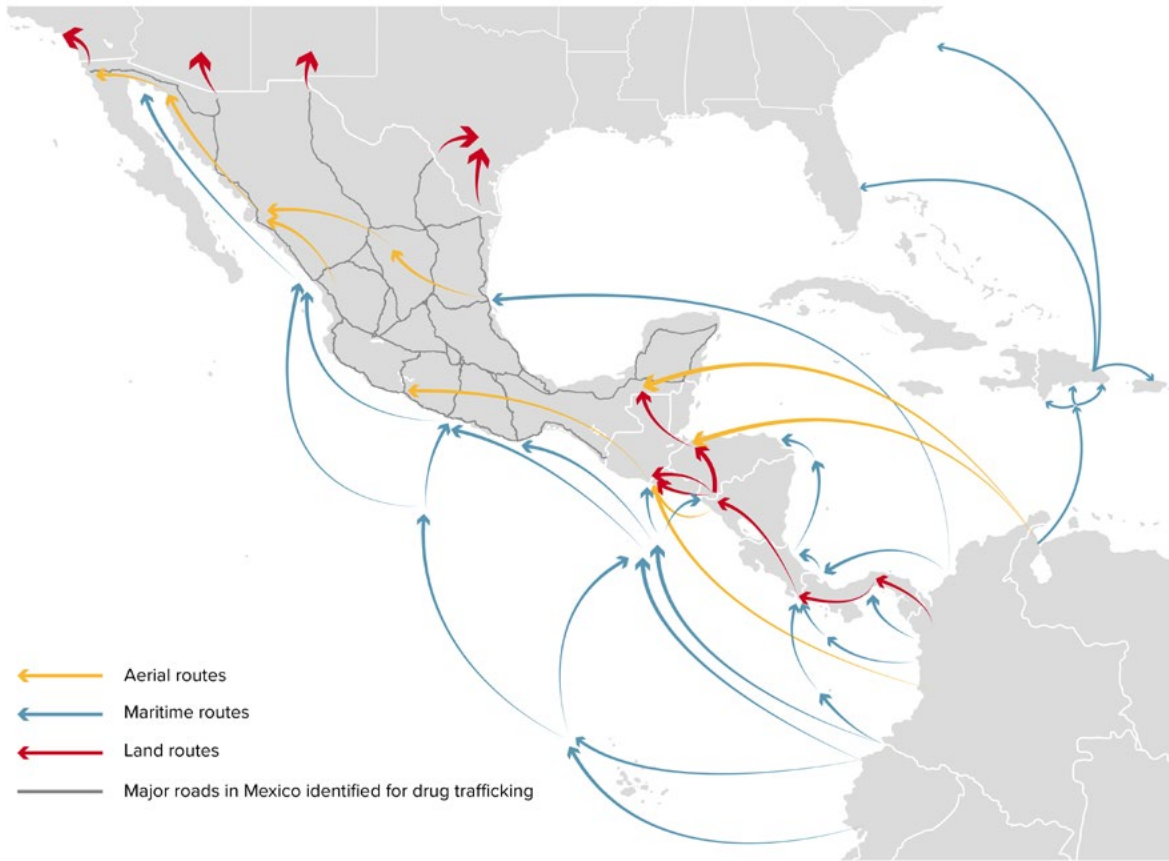
The challenge lies in how to enhance Colombia’s capabilities in maritime interdictions. Under Colombian law, any individual arrested by a Colombian authority at sea must be presented to a judicial officer within forty-eight hours. In practice, this means that offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) must leave station, return to port, and then return to station—a process that can take days to complete. During that time, there is a gap in maritime coverage.

The United States can support Colombia by offering essential equipment and training to incorporate advanced technology into OPVs. This could involve leveraging video processing techniques to facilitate due process during apprehensions at sea, thus negating the need for the vessel to return to port, while ensuring the protection of the rights of the accused and full compliance with Colombian law. The US Southern Command can play an important role in this effort and in training and intelligence analysis; further operational support should be provided to minimize OPV loopholes in maritime interdiction.

Given the wide-reaching impact of illicit drug trafficking across the hemisphere, the United States and Colombia should double down on their coordination efforts for maritime interdiction with other South and Central American countries such as Panama, Mexico, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and Argentina, all of which play important roles in seizing narcotics. These countries could build on past successful joint operations⁴⁰ in intelligence shar-

40 Nelson Bocanegra and Oliver Griffin, “Colombia, Ecuador Agree Joint Plan to Tackle Organized Crime on Border,” Reuters, December 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombia-ecuador-agree-joint-plan-tackle-organized-crime-border-2022-12-29/>.

Figure 2: Major Trafficking Pathways



Source: UNODC, Global Cocaine Report 2023

ing about traffickers’ activities by investing in joint maritime interdiction activities. There may also be greater opportunities for coordination to ensure that trafficking networks can be effectively charged and prosecuted across jurisdictions.

Additionally, the United States should take advantage of its strong military-to-military partnership with Colombia to double down on hemispheric defense, security cooperation, and anticorruption. One avenue could be to revitalize the High-Level Dialogues⁴¹ as a vehicle for concrete bilateral and multilateral cooperation, with meaningful deliverables that remain a priority for global actors aiming to curb the effects of a growing drug market.

2: Define precise and inclusive guidelines for the manual eradication of “industrial” plantations, while working to develop additional metrics to measure progress.

To effectively combat coca cultivation in Colombia, it is crucial for the United States and Colombian governments to define clear criteria for identifying industrial coca plantations eligible for manual eradication. The following items should be considered in this criterion.

The National Development Plan recently approved by the Colombian Congress intends to modify the eradication ap-

41 “Secretary Blinken’s Participation in the Tenth U.S.-Colombia High-Level Dialogue,” US Department of State, March 24, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-participation-in-the-tenth-u-s-colombia-high-level-dialogue/#:~:text=At%20the%20HLD%2C%20the%20two,energy%20transition%2C%20and%20climate%20action.>

proach for illicit crops by developing a strategy of regularizing large, highly concentrated coca plots so that they can be used for industrial-scale production for legal markets. In replacing coca and other illicit crops with other industrial-scale agricultural yields, several factors should be considered. These include the type of industrial crops best suited for coca-growing areas, the presence of an external market for large-scale production, and the fulfilment of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards overseas so that these products can have a guaranteed market access. To comply with these requirements, the Colombian government should promote public and private alliances to produce industrial-scale crops with SPS standards approved such as yams, cacao, Hass avocados, limes, peppers, and mangoes.

Defining “industrial coca cultivation” will be difficult. Coca is typically cultivated by small-scale farmers in isolated areas; the average small farm covers around 2.5 hectares. While there is general acceptance that industrial cultivation entails plots that are larger than this, the exact parameters are still being considered by Colombian authorities. According to the recently released drug strategy, the exact size of “industrial” plots will change depending on the geographic location. Defining these variables will be key to implementing a successful plan for both eradication and crop substitution.

Evaluating the location of the plantations is also important. Small-scale coca cultivation is often integrated⁴² with other crops in rural communities, while larger plots are typically situated farther away from populated areas. Considering transportation methods used by drug organizations can provide additional insights, particularly their preference for river transport⁴³ in Colombia’s Pacific region. Therefore, plots directly adjacent to rivers should be deemed industrial, especially when combined with size and location factors. Gathering information on density of coca production, proximity to industrial-sized labs, and areas of cultivation under the control of armed groups/traffickers will be key.

By establishing clear criteria, the Colombian government, with support from the United States in logistics and intelligence, can effectively utilize manual eradication as a targeted tool within their comprehensive efforts to combat coca cultivation. Defining these criteria will help ensure a focused approach that minimizes negative impacts on small farmers while effectively addressing the industrial plantations associated with TCOs.

3: Strengthen coordination efforts between national and local governance on rule of law and state presence in conflict-torn communities.

Crucial to the advancement of shared US and Colombian interests is strengthening institutions and the rule of law in the areas most affected by the armed conflict in Colombia. The presence of weak institutions and the lack of economic opportunities in these regions foster the presence of organized crime and illicit activity. These issues have a profound impact on the well-being of Colombians and pose significant security challenges to Colombia and the rest of the hemisphere.

To address these challenges, the Petro administration should enhance coordination efforts between the national government and local authorities. While the current drug and security strategies outline fundamental areas for progress, they can better incorporate perspectives from local government at the level of cities and municipalities. These may include but is not exclusive to persistent budgetary concerns exacerbated by growing migration pressures and the need for greater coordination on the implementation of nationwide policies.

The United States can also play a pivotal role in supporting Colombia on the consolidation of robust and legitimate state institutions in historically marginalized regions’s rural development through financial resources directed at the development of a long-term strategy that transcends military and police deployment, and focuses on security, rule of law, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has a track record⁴⁴ of successfully extending democratic institutions, government services, and the rule of law to former conflict-ridden areas. The United States should work to sustain funding for USAID Colombia programs that can further amplify these efforts. Furthermore, the United States should continue capacity-building efforts to enhance Colombia’s national and local government capabilities in investigating and prosecuting complex financial crimes. These crimes, such as money laundering derived primarily from the illicit drug trade and the infiltration of illegal mining into the economy, persist as significant challenges that demand attention.

42 “Colombia: Petro sugiere sembrar coca y sustituto en paralelo,” Associated Press, December 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2172e6701483f16736e1a9789fabfe2d>.

43 *Global Report on Cocaine 2023: Local Dynamics, Global Challenges*, United Nations, March 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf.

44 “The Untapped Potential of the US-Colombia Partnership,” Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force.

4: Expand and strengthen US-led capacity-building programs for the prevention and detection of money laundering and financial crimes, with an emphasis on cyber-based illicit transactions.

The United States and Colombia share a longstanding commitment to combatting money laundering and the financing of criminal activities. While Colombia today is one of the few countries⁴⁵ in the region that complies with most international standards to combat money laundering, there are opportunities for improved bilateral coordination.

In September 2023⁴⁶ the US-Colombia Counternarcotics Working Group identified the dismantling of money laundering networks as a top priority within a comprehensive whole-of-government strategy to combat illicit drug trafficking in Colombia. This dovetails with the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force for Latin America (GAFILAT) 2018 report⁴⁷ highlighting the need for Colombia to enhance its capacity to combat money laundering due to the high influx of illegal funds and the complex information required for analysis and decision-making. Certain sectors, including banking, gold mining, legal advisory and real estate are particularly vulnerable to money laundering. To address this, Colombian law enforcement, military forces, and intelligence units should enhance existing partnerships with their US counterparts to significantly upscale training and capacity-building across agencies involved in dismantling money laundering operations. These efforts should incorporate the perspectives of not only judicial officials, but also financial institutions and private sector representatives. Special attention should be given to small financial cooperatives and credit providers, which are at a higher risk of unwittingly facilitating illegal transactions.

In addition to implementing US assistance earmarked for such capacity building, it is crucial to ensure that Colombian security forces and intelligence are equipped with the necessary technology to secure a competitive edge over organized crime. Particular emphasis should be placed on developing the capabilities to trace and combat cryptocurrency-related cybercrime and money laundering. Due to its weak and in some cases non-existent regulatory frameworks, Colombia and the rest of the region are important targets of cybercrimes. The United States can and should help Colombia develop the capabilities and framework to fight this emerging threat, which could then position Colombia

as a regional leader on the issue—at a time when cybercrime is an increasing concern across the hemisphere.

5: Advance the implementation of a holistic bilateral counternarcotics agenda through a careful balance of effective drug policies.

The United States and Colombia should adopt a holistic approach toward their counternarcotics agenda as the foundation for their cooperation. Implementing an integral drug policy that encourages alternatives to illicit coca crops in the short term and addresses other aspects of the drug trade, including cocaine production, trafficking, and consumption, is crucial for addressing the global drug problem in a way that achieves long-term goals.

Traditionally, policies such as forced eradication, interdictions, military cooperation, and extraditions have been used to disrupt drug trafficking in the short term. However, criminal groups have effectively responded by moving coca production to different areas, creating new leadership structures, and collaborating with other international criminal actors to evade control mechanisms. To respond to this challenge, the United States and Colombia should build on successful elements of Plan Colombia by providing specialized training in intelligence gathering, investigation techniques, and interagency cooperation. They should also double down on cooperation efforts related to real-time intelligence sharing on drug trafficking including routes, money laundering, and key individuals and promote advanced technologies for surveillance, interdiction, and data analytics to combat traffickers. Both governments should prioritize policies that will effectively mitigate the escalating violence and security challenges in Colombia first. Once this is successfully managed, they can then shift their attention to longer-term agendas.

If combined with long-term approaches such as alternative development programs, the United States and Colombia can begin to address the root causes of drug production. Offering economic opportunities, technical training, and support for communities transitioning away from illicit crops (particularly in the form of education) is critical. Combining holistic alternative development programs with effective law enforcement and eradication has emerged as the most effective model⁴⁸ for successful holistic drug policies in the long term. The

45 “De lo peor a lo mejor: lucha contra el lavado de dinero en Latinoamérica,” Insight Crime, February 7, 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/peor-mejor-lucha-lavado-dinero-latinoamerica/>

46 “Third U.S.-Colombia Counternarcotics Working Group (CNWG) Joint Statement,” U.S. Department of State, September 26, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/third-u-s-colombia-counternarcotics-working-group-cnwg-joint-statement/#:~:text=Both%20delegations%20met%20in%20the,Colombia%20counternarcotics%20Relationship%20to%20address>

47 “Informe de Evaluación Mutua de Colombia,” GAFILAT, March 21, 2019, <https://www.gafilat.org/index.php/es/biblioteca-virtual/miembros/colombia/evaluaciones-mtuas-4/3286-informe-de-evaluacion-mtua-de-colombia>

48 *Global Report on Cocaine 2023*, United Nations.

Colombian government should begin by focusing this strategy on three major coca-producing departments⁴⁹—Nariño, Putumayo, and Norte de Santander—which can have a significant impact on territories responsible for 44 percent of the national illicit coca production.

An effective counternarcotics strategy hinges on finding the right balance between eradication and substitution efforts, combined with public health campaigns, prevention, harm reduction and treatment. Neglecting eradication or providing insufficient funding for alternative development programs can undermine the effectiveness of the bilateral counternarcotics agenda. As the partnership evolves, it is essential to incorporate both approaches into the agenda.

6: Work with affected communities to develop an environmentally sustainable approach to transition to legal crop cultivation while mitigating further environmental damage.

The cocaine market takes an undeniable toll on Colombia’s environment. According to the UNODC, 52 percent of coca cultivation takes place in “special management areas,” such as national parks, indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories, and forest preserves. While coca cultivation is not the main cause of deforestation in the Amazon, its expansion is a growing concern as TCOs have already been observed providing services for illegal mining and wildlife trafficking in the Amazon. To mitigate the crisis, US and Colombian decision-makers should draw on their mutual interest in environmental conservation to integrate effective sustainability tools into the counternarcotics agenda.

The Colombian government is exploring the possibility of sustainability-linked bonds (SLB) to fund ongoing and new sustainability projects in the Colombian Amazon, with an intention to curtail deforestation and loss of ecosystem. Latin America and Caribbean countries have a strong record of SLB issuance, spearheaded by Uruguay and Chile, yet Colombia possesses a distinctive advantage—it’s national green taxonomy.⁵⁰

Established in 2022 and lauded by the World Bank, Colombia’s green taxonomy serves as a classification tool that allows lenders and borrowers to identify economic activities that contribute to specific environmental targets. Colombia should take advantage of its green taxonomy to collaborate on the issuance of these bonds with US private-sector entities including commercial banks and US-based international financial institutions such as the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the World Bank, which have consistently emerged as pivotal allies for the region’s sustainability initiatives and can help by providing guarantees to investors as AAA-rated bondholders to curtail the potential risks that might worry investors. By fostering these strategic partnerships, Colombia can effectively steer its SLB issuance onto the international market, enhancing bilateral ties and attracting a more diverse and environmentally responsible investor base.⁵¹

Similarly, the Petro administration and other Amazonian countries have discussed a “debt swap for climate action” plan,⁵² in which developed countries and/or international financial institutions would provide additional resources for the governments of Amazonian nations to combat deforestation, illegal mining and logging, and other harmful environmental practices. The United States could be a key partner in accompanying the Colombian government in shaping the preservation of the Amazon, as it will require restructuring a portion of Colombia’s debt to allocate the saved funds toward initiatives focused on forest preservation, sustainable land use, and community development. To achieve this, both countries can begin by collaborating on a detailed framework that outlines specific conservation targets and reforestation goals to then decide on the allocation of saved debt funds toward a combination of projects, particularly in areas with coca cultivation. The United States could become a key contributor to the effort by monitoring and verifying that the committed funds are being utilized effectively.

Additionally, a robust counternarcotics agenda should consider incorporating sustainability incentives at the local level, especially those involving economic incentives and meaningful engagement with local communities. A clear example of this effort

49 “Illegal Drugs, Anti-Drug Policy Failure, and the Need for Institutional Reforms in Colombia,” Fransisco E. Thoumi, 2012, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/10826084.2012.663287>

50 “Colombia: Leading the Path to Sustainability in Latin America,” World Bank, September 7, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/08/31/colombia-leading-the-path-to-sustainability-in-latin-america#:~:text=In%20April%202022%2C%20Colombia%20became%20the%20first%20country,economic%20activities%20that%20contribute%20to%20specific%20environmental%20targets.>

51 *Colombia Sovereign Green Bond Framework*, Ministry of Finance and Public Credit, Republic of Colombia, July 2021, https://www.irc.gov.co/webcenter/ShowProperty?nodeId=%2FConexionContent%2FWCC_CLUSTER-170719.

52 Srinivasan Ramani, “Amazon Rainforest | The Scramble to Save the Planet’s Lungs,” *Hindu*, August 13, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/science/amazon-rainforest-the-scramble-to-save-the-planets-lungs/article67188456.ece>.

are payments for ecosystem services (PES schemes), which can take various forms, but essentially consist of direct payments to landowners who commit to sustainable land use practices, agroforestry, reforestation, or habitat restoration. These payments would serve as incentives for farmers and landholders to transition away from illicit crops or environmentally damaging practices. PES schemes have had success in other countries across the region,⁵³ particularly in areas with developed infrastructure allowing for monitoring and law enforcement, providing additional income incentives to protect a critical common good in the Amazon.

While these three initiatives may not fully reverse the environmental harm caused by illicit coca cultivation, laboratories, and chemical waste in the Amazon, they hold promise in mitigating future damage by offering sustainable incentives to coca farmers in the Amazon region that may halt damaging practices. This approach aims to encourage their participation in legal activities that contribute to the preservation of the Amazon. To maximize their impact, these programs should be implemented with a balanced approach that combines law enforcement measures for communities engaging in illegal activities while providing financial compensation for those embracing legal alternatives.

7: Advocate for the creation of a multilateral trust fund that can provide sustained funding for crop substitution and alternative development programs to curb the growing illicit drug-production trend.

Colombia's new anti-drug strategy carries an estimated cost exceeding \$21 billion over the next decade. To secure international support and incentivize donors to contribute to the long-term success of crop substitution and an alternative development program, we propose the establishment of a trust fund led by a recognized international financial institution.

Given that the World Bank has a proven track record of efficiently mobilizing resources through trust funds,⁵⁴ it may be best suited to leverage its extensive convening power on both the international stage and within individual countries. The institution's technical expertise, country-specific knowledge, robust supervision capabilities, and stringent financial controls would ensure effective monitoring and reporting of results for crop substitution and alternative development programs in Colombia.

Although the World Bank has extensive experience in designing trust funds for fragile and conflict-affected areas, the insti-

tion would need to draw financial and technical support from the United States and Colombian governments. They should begin their collaborative efforts by further defining clear and realistic goals that enhance the trust fund's credibility and attract international stakeholders affected by illicit drug markets. The goals should include project timelines and clear metrics of success that can ensure donors their investments are being well managed. While the trust fund should start with seed money from the lead institution, the Colombian and US governments should be among the first investors. Support from these three entities would be able to harness participation from other international partners such as the European Union, Asian countries, and regions heavily affected by the proliferation of new drug markets.

In addition to government partners, key development agencies such as the DFC, the International Finance Corporation, the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (or CAF Development Bank), and the IDB should be engaged in implementing the fund. International partners, such as the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, could help augment these efforts.

The private sector in both the United States and Colombia can significantly contribute to this fund's success, particularly by helping streamline regulations and licensing for importing these crops into US and other markets attracting foreign direct investment and expanding existing capital investments. Private sector investment also provides opportunities for collaboration on "friend shoring"—that is, working with like-minded nations to reduce the supply chain vulnerabilities and dependence on China. Investment in training and agricultural extension programs can also empower local farmers to meet regulatory and health standards, enhancing competitiveness in export markets.

The trust fund should also prioritize road and infrastructure development projects in high coca production regions, connecting areas affected by organized crime with economic opportunities. This investment would stimulate local economies, improve the transportation of perishable crops to legal markets, and facilitate the relocation of security forces, community courts, and service providers to remote areas, strengthening government presence. Simultaneously, it can also help address broader global aspects of the drug market through prevention and public health campaigns.

53 "The Costa Rica PES Program: The Success, the Challenges and Its New Opportunities of Financing," Environment for Development (Efd) initiative, December 10, 2018, <https://www.efdinitiative.org/news/costa-rica-pes-program-success-challenges-and-its-new-opportunities-financing>.

54 "Trust Funds and Programs," World Bank, accessed August 2023, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/trust-funds-and-programs#:~:text=Trust%20funds%20allow%20the%20Bank,development%20actors%20through%20partnership%20programs>.



Workers prepare to eradicate coca leaf plantations as part of a government counter-narcotic program in southern Narino province August, 14, 2007. After receiving billions in U.S. aid to spray illegal coca crops from the air, Colombia is shifting strategy to emphasize more eradication on the ground to attack the bright leaves used to make drugs that end up sold on European and U.S. streets. Picture taken on August 14, 2007. REUTERS/Jose Miguel Gomez (COLOMBIA)

CONCLUSION

The complex and evolving landscape of TCOs and the challenges posed by the illicit drug trade call for new thinking in US-Colombia counternarcotics cooperation. The combination of shifting coca markets, environmental degradation, security threats and the Petro administration's novel counternarcotics approach all combine to create an urgent need for a holistic strategy, through which both countries can address immediate concerns and the underlying factors at play. The recommendations put forth by the US-Colombia Advisory Group offer a roadmap for addressing these challenges collaboratively and effectively.

The United States and Colombia have a unique opportunity to cement their position as key partners in implementing an evidence-based approach to drug policy while also taking on TCOs. Moving forward, it is crucial that both nations align their strategies to make the most impactful use of US assistance. The recommendations presented here are meant to spur a new approach to a decades-old problem, and to encourage policymakers in the United States and Colombia to chart a new path forward.

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About the Authors

Geoff Ramsey is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center. Ramsey is a leading expert on US policy towards Venezuela and has traveled regularly to the country for the last decade. Before joining the Atlantic Council, Ramsey directed the Venezuela program at the Washington Office on Latin America where he led the organization's research on Venezuela and worked to promote lasting political agreements aimed at restoring human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. Prior to that, he carried out research and reporting on security and human-rights issues in Colombia, Uruguay, and Brazil with InSight Crime and as a consultant for the Open Society Foundations.

His work has been published or cited in *Foreign Policy*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Economist*, and other major media outlets.

Ramsey earned a master's degree in international affairs from the American University School of International Service, as well as a bachelor of arts in international studies with a minor in Spanish from American University.

Isabel Chiriboga is a program assistant at the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, where she contributes to the center's work on Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile. She also helps steward the Center's Advisory Council. During her time at the Atlantic Council, she has supported the work of the US-Colombia Advisory Group, the US-Chile Integration Program and the center's programming around the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings. Her work has been published in *Foreign Policy*, *Miami Herald*, *The National Interest*, *Global Americans* and the *New Atlanticist*. Prior to her time at the Atlantic Council, Chiriboga worked as a research assistant at the London School of Economics' Department of International Relations conducting research on the impact of land inequality in Argentina's democratization. Prior to that, she worked at the embassy of Ecuador in Washington, where she supported the trade agreement negotiations process between Ecuador and the United States. Originally from Ecuador, Chiriboga has lived in the United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom. She has a bachelor's degree in international economics and international affairs from Trinity University. Chiriboga also completed a year-long study abroad program at the London School of Economics.



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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org