

## The End of the War on Drugs? Reimagining the US-Colombia Relationship

### Description

*This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point.*

On June 19, Colombia elected Gustavo Petro as its president. The election of the former mayor of Bogotá and ex-M-19 guerrilla fighter represents a historic break from a [nearly uninterrupted](#) two-hundred-year run of government by [white mestizo elites](#). If implemented, the [three pillars](#) of his campaign platform—environmental reforms, women’s equality, and peace—would transform the Andean country, which has been plagued by more than half a century of internal armed conflict.

But his administration will face serious challenges, including strong [political opposition](#), [a faltering economy with rising inflation](#), and a Venezuelan [migration crisis](#). Despite the 2016 peace deal with Colombia’s largest insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country’s violence has [spiked](#) in recent years, largely due to the previous administration’s active opposition to full implementation of the peace accord’s provisions. And to make matters worse, Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel has expanded its presence in Colombia.

Petro has explicitly [rejected the militarized elements](#) of the war on drugs (largely implemented through [Plan Colombia](#)), a central feature of the US relationship with its [strongest ally](#) in the Western Hemisphere, raising [concerns](#) of a significant shift in the US-Colombia relationship. But there are still several opportunities to simultaneously strengthen the bilateral relationship and advance the three pillars of the [US counternarcotics strategy](#) in Colombia (drug supply reduction, comprehensive rural development, and environmental protection)—all while leaving space for Petro to advance his own national agenda.

### The Expansion of the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel in Colombia

Reports of Sinaloa Cartel presence in Colombia have surfaced since at least [2013](#), although incidents (such as the Cartel exchanging [arms](#) for cocaine) in the Caquetá-Putumayo region have [increased significantly since 2019](#). To better understand the implications of these dynamics for US-Colombia counternarcotics efforts, I recently took my research team to speak with residents in areas known for intensive nonstate armed group activity.

Our interlocutors noted that cartel presence in the area has resulted in an increase in murders and forced displacement to levels reminiscent of some of the worst years of the armed conflict. Though violence has declined at a national level over the years, there has been a worrying recent uptick, with organized political violence [increasing by 70 percent](#) from 2020 to 2021. The growth of the Sinaloa Cartel within the portfolio of [ninety-three](#) armed groups currently operating in the country will assuredly increase cocaine production, which has [tripled since 2012](#) and remains at [historic highs](#) despite decades of concerted counternarcotics efforts by Colombia and the United States. Cartel presence alone, however, does not explain this increase.

The existing upward trend results in part from a combination of a failure to substantively implement the peace accord's measures to tackle drug trafficking and rent-seeking actions by rural populations. In 2016, for example, I observed rural residents burning the hillsides to plant coca and become eligible for benefits attached to the illicit crop substitution [provisions in the accord](#). When those provisions never materialized, residents simply continued to cultivate coca. Some who began state-sponsored programs fared even worse. One group of farmers who took part in the [National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops](#) let their coca plants die as part of the program's requirements for participation. But the promised substitutions never arrived. Now, these residents endure hunger and a sense of hopelessness. Given the opportunity to earn a dignified livelihood, they told my research team they would "welcome the Sinaloa Cartel with open arms."

These failings in rural development and the incomplete implementation of the peace accord have occurred alongside an [increase in systematic violence](#) against indigenous populations, demobilized guerrillas, social leaders, and human rights activists to create the perfect recipe for cartel expansion. Quite predictably, these armed actors are filling a vacuum left when the FARC laid down its arms and no (or meager) state-backed alternatives for citizen security took the group's place. "The cartel" is increasingly invoked as the default perpetrator when citizens discuss local violence. A landowner in one town was recently assassinated. *It was Sinaloa*. Someone rode up on a scooter to a car with three men in it and shot them all. *Sinaloa*. While it is unlikely that every act of lethal violence is a direct result of cartel presence, the power that this group has amassed has significant implications for policy implementation. At the end of the day, these coca-growing communities must live the everyday realities of efforts to decrease production. Without contextually relevant programming and local capacities for sustaining outcomes, any initiatives will [meet](#) with lackluster outcomes at best.

### **Land, Development, Security: The De-narcification of Counternarcotics Strategies**

The December 2020 [report](#) from the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission lays out several recommendations for this new chapter in bilateral relations between the United States and Colombia. It calls for the United States to support partner governments in countering transnational criminal

organizations, support licit livelihood programs in coca-growing regions, support citizen security and human rights, develop law enforcement assistance programs, and rethink traditional coca-eradication methods. In Colombia, the incomplete implementation of the peace accord, lack of alternative livelihood options, and absence of security guarantees combine to present a significant threat to the Petro administration's policy goals. Fortunately, [early overtures](#) between the US and Colombian presidents also suggest a willingness to find a way forward. There are several steps President Joe Biden's administration can take to simultaneously improve its relationship with Petro and strengthen its counternarcotics strategy.

First, US policymakers should build on long-standing US relationships with Colombia's historical political and economic elites who might oppose Petro but can facilitate dialogue that supports his efforts to implement the land-reform component of the peace accord. Latin America has the most unequal land distribution in the world, and Colombia is [the worst](#) of the region. Land reform represents a national priority for many reasons—it is the issue at the heart of the Colombian conflict—but the very landholders who have benefitted from these structures constitute some of the staunchest opposition forces to the Petro administration. The United States' (generally) warm relationship with Colombia and its historical elite could provide leverage for advancing land reform under the Petro administration. Such efforts align well with several crucial elements of the "comprehensive rural security and development" pillar of the Biden administration's [counternarcotics strategy](#).

Second, US and Colombian policymakers should explicitly and permanently rule out any future aerial fumigation spraying. Aerial herbicide spraying has [few long-term benefits](#) (even if some short-term reductions in coca production do occur). The practice was banned in Colombia in [2015](#) due to concerns about adverse [population health outcomes](#) and little in the way of demonstrable gains. Former Colombian President Ivan Duque, however, had campaigned on a [pledge](#) to restart the practice, and at the end of 2019, the Colombian government [announced](#) that spraying would resume in early 2020. This was in part also a response to then US President Donald Trump's [assertion](#) that "You're going to have to spray," (though the COVID pandemic complicated those plans). Furthermore, spraying is not cost effective: the United Nations and the Colombian government have [reported](#) that spraying a hectare of crops costs 80 percent more than complying with existing crop replacement plans. Announcing a joint agreement to foreclose future spraying in the country would provide Petro with an early win in environmental protection and bolster his image among his supporters—all with little cost to measurable outcomes for the United States. Both Petro's and Biden's administrations have also named [advancing climate goals](#) as political priorities; both can claim policy wins while freeing up funding for more urgent and effective domains.

Third, US policymakers should work with their Colombian counterparts to build military and law enforcement capacity through support for the direct implementation of the mandates of the Colombian agency dedicated to illegal crop substitution. That will entail making sure that long-term security provisions are in place in each implementation site so that the rural police, human rights defenders, and social leaders can work in concert to ensure sustainability once external supports have withdrawn. Adequate citizen security does not exist in large segments of Colombia, particularly rural areas. Stabilization and sustainable development pathways out of illicit economies will not succeed until this is adequately addressed. As noted above, targeted killings of civil society leaders, former guerrillas, and indigenous people have been on the rise. In 2021, [one social leader was killed every sixty hours](#). Coupled with the growing violent displacement of independent landowners in the countryside, these dynamics form among the most significant threats to security for the incoming administration. Supporting the professionalization and expansion of the military and police would contribute to Petro's dual goals of reducing targeted assassinations and disbanding the country's [notoriously brutal](#) mobile anti-riot squad (ESMAD). It would also support the Biden administration's strategy of supporting rural security. These efforts, coupled with a robust information operations campaign led by the Colombian military with US support, would positively impact tangible and intangible targets alike—from reduced coca production and fewer civilian deaths to a reduction in fear and increased ability to participate in crop substitution programs.

Maintaining close ties despite important policy disagreements will require creativity and political will. Cristina Hoyos Koerbel, a former official in the Colombian Ministry of the Environment, told me of the role that the ministry played in counternarcotics efforts at a time when relations between the United States and Colombia had cooled. In the 1990s, the leaders of both countries had ceased dialogue over US [accusations](#) that the drug cartels had funded Colombian President Ernesto Samper's 1994 election campaign. Despite this, negotiators from the Colombian Ministry of the Environment opened a channel with the US State Department and Department of the Interior to end aerial spraying because of its devastating effects on biodiversity in the region. Unable to conduct direct security dialogues at the time, they decided to *desnarcotizar* relations—to remove the language of counternarcotics so that some degree of cooperation could still occur. The result was a successful set of negotiations on environmental issues that affected coca production despite official silence in other domains. Similar creativity may be required today to manage the US-Colombia relationship.

Given the complexities of Petro's agenda, subtlety will prove a useful ally for the United States over the next four years. If the United States truly wants to play a meaningful role in reducing cocaine production in the country, it would be far better served investing counternarcotics resources into producing viable alternatives for rural farmers whose only option is to grow coca—people who, in the absence of such alternatives, would welcome the cartel with open arms.

The production of cocaine in Colombia involves many actors: civilians just getting by, reconfigured paramilitary groups, FARC dissident factions, masquerading violence entrepreneurs, and international drug cartels, among others. This constellation of forces suggests that alternative livelihoods and effective crop substitution programs must be simultaneously combined with both security and market integration and backed by real political will to achieve the intended results. Without this three-pronged approach, the production and flow of cocaine through and out of Colombia will not abate. A great deal of military and aid spending in Colombia goes to destroying cocaine laboratories. But just as quickly as the jungle swallows the remnants of one, another sprouts nearby. Land reform, rural security, and development that connects rural citizens to the markets that will sustain them—these constitute the pillars of a sustainable counternarcotics strategy upon which both the United States and Colombia can agree.

*Dr. Erin K. McFee is a UKRI future leaders fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science Latin America and Caribbean Centre, a fellow with the Irregular Warfare Initiative, and a researcher at the Office for Military-Affiliated Communities at the University of Chicago. You can learn more about her work at [erinmcfree.com](https://erinmcfree.com) and her UKRI-funded initiative at [trustafterbetrayal.org](https://trustafterbetrayal.org), follow her on Twitter (@erinmcfree), and connect on [LinkedIn](#).*

*The author would like to thank Trust after Betrayal's research associates Connor Christensen and Arturo Gutierrez de Velasco for their contributions to this ongoing project.*

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*Main Image: Inauguration of Gustavo Petro & Francia Márquez from US Embassy. (US Embassy Bogotá, [via Wikimedia Commons](#))*

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**Date Created**

2022/08/18