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Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations

Colombia, a key U.S. security and economic partner in South America, continues to confront illegally armed groups and remains the world's largest cocaine producer despite having been among the top recipients of U.S. foreign assistance since the FY2000 launch of Plan Colombia, a counternarcotics and security initiative. U.S. assistance helped the Colombian government train and equip its security forces, regain control of territory from armed groups, improve security and rural development, and compel a weakened guerrilla insurgency, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), to negotiate. The 2016 peace accord with the FARC ended a half century of civil conflict and contributed to reductions in indicators of crime and insecurity. Since the FARC's demobilization and disarmament, other groups have fought for control over lucrative drug trafficking, alien smuggling, and other illicit industries amidst a continued lack of state presence in many regions.

In August 2022, Gustavo Petro, Colombia's first leftist president and head of the *Pacto Histórico* (PH, or Historic Pact) political coalition of left-leaning parties, took office for a four-year term. Petro promised to enact bold reforms to combat inequality, promote inclusion, and achieve peace in the country through negotiations with the country's remaining armed groups. The Petro government has shepherded tax, pension, and agricultural reforms through the legislature, as well as adopted a drug policy and national development plan focused on land redistribution and environmental protection. In October 2024, Petro's approval rating stood at 34%, considerably lower than when he took office. Observers have attributed Petro's flagging popular approval to the gradual collapse of his governing coalition, scandals involving his family and cabinet officials, the country's sluggish economic growth (0.6% in 2023), and rising rural violence. Petro's Total Peace initiative involving simultaneous negotiations with most armed groups—including the National Liberation Army (ELN)—has stalled. Implementation of the 2016 peace accord with the FARC has also lagged.

U.S. Policy

For over two decades, Colombia has been a top U.S. ally and security partner in the Western Hemisphere. Over that period, U.S. relations with Colombia expanded from mainly counternarcotics and counterterrorism cooperation to a broad bilateral agenda that includes migration and peace accord implementation, among other topics. Designated by President Biden as a major non-NATO U.S. ally in 2022, Colombia has also solidified its role as a regional leader and implementer of U.S. security assistance programs in other partner countries. Biden Administration officials have asserted that U.S. relations with Colombia remain strong and that bilateral efforts have adapted to include some Petro administration priorities, such as environmental protection and rural development. In May 2024, U.S. and Colombian officials convened the 11th High-Level Dialogue, during which they reaffirmed a shared commitment to bolstering bilateral relations and to working together to address a range of hemispheric challenges. In August 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken thanked the Colombian government for its efforts to mediate a democratic transition in Venezuela.

Legislative Action

Congress for FY2024 reduced U.S. foreign assistance to Colombia and placed additional conditions on that assistance because of concerns that President Petro's drug policies have fueled record coca cultivation and that his foreign policy positions, particularly his criticism of Israel, run counter to U.S. interests. The Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47, Division F), and accompanying explanatory statement designate at least \$377.5 million for Colombia, subject to certain restrictions and withholding conditions. That total is \$75.6 million less than the Biden Administration's estimated allocation of \$453.1 million for Colombia for FY2023 but still the highest for any country in the Western Hemisphere.

Congress is now considering the Administration's FY2025 request of \$413.3 million for Colombia, 8.9% lower than the FY2023 estimated allocation of \$453 million. The House-passed version of the FY2025 SFOPS measure (H.R. 8771/H.Rept. 118-554) would provide \$208.5 million for Colombia, reducing aid in three accounts by 50% because of President Petro's "detrimental policies and relationships." The Senate-introduced version of the measure (S. 4797/S.Rept. 118-200) would provide Colombia with \$380 million subject to counternarcotics and human-rights-related withholding requirements.

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Introduction

Colombia, the closest U.S. security partner in Latin America and the Caribbean, has received significant U.S. foreign assistance and congressional attention since the launch of Plan Colombia, a counternarcotics and security assistance program that began in FY2000. U.S. assistance, totaling over \$10 billion from State and Defense Department accounts between FY2000 and FY2018, helped the Colombian state—which faced potential collapse in the late 1990s—reduce homicides and kidnappings, regain control of its territory, and demobilize right- and left-wing armed groups.¹ Colombia has implemented U.S. security training programs for other countries in the region and developed sophisticated drug interdiction capacity. Despite those achievements, coca cultivation and potential cocaine production rose after 2013, and illegally armed groups have fought for control of the country’s drug and other illicit industries. Colombian security forces have also been implicated in major human rights violations.

U.S.-Colombia relations have grown tense under the current leftist government of President Gustavo Petro, which took office in August 2022 and has pursued certain policy changes—including some related to counternarcotics—that have prompted some Members of Congress to question whether robust U.S. assistance for the country should continue.² The Petro government has worked with the United States on issues related to security and the rule of law, migration, and environmental conservation, as well as resolution of the crisis in Venezuela. Nevertheless, some Members of Congress have disagreed with some of President Petro’s rhetoric and positions, including his opposition to U.S.-backed policies to reduce illicit drug supplies.³ During the 118th Congress, appropriators have disagreed on the amount of funding to provide to Colombia and the extent to which such assistance should be withheld until certain conditions are met.

This report provides background information on Colombia, an overview of current political and economic conditions in the country, and analysis for Congress on select issues in U.S.-Colombia relations.

Background

Colombia’s vast and varied terrain—which includes the Andes mountains, Amazonian jungles, deserts, and grasslands—has posed governance challenges (see **Figure 1**). Despite its long history of democracy, Colombia has struggled to establish state control over its territory and to overcome a legacy of political violence that began in the 19th century.⁴ In the 1960s, leftist groups, some inspired by the Cuban Revolution, accused the Colombian central government of neglecting rural areas, resulting in poverty, inequality, and highly concentrated land ownership. These groups

¹ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, GAO-09-71, October 2008; GAO, *U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review Its Overall U.S. Approach*, GAO-19-106, December 2018.

² House Appropriations Committee, “Diaz-Balart Remarks at FY24 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill Full Committee Markup,” July 12, 2023.

³ “Irrational War on Drugs, Destruction of the Amazon, Expose Humanity’s Failures, Colombia’s Petro Tells UN,” *UN News*, September 20, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127151>; U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, “Petro’s Backfiring Policies Imperil Two Decades of Colombian Progress,” *Medium*, May 14, 2024.

⁴ Violence between two major parties peaked during the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1904) and from 1948 to 1964, a period known as “La Violencia.” See David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Marco Palacios and Frank Safford, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

formed guerrilla organizations, including the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN, or National Liberation Army), to challenge the state.⁵ In response, the Colombian government backed the creation of paramilitary organizations to protect landowners in areas without government security forces. By the 1980s, these paramilitaries had evolved into illegal armies that served private interests (landowners, ranchers, and drug traffickers). By the late 1990s, the FARC, ELN, and rightist, paramilitary *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC, or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) used revenue from cocaine trafficking to independently fund acts of terrorism—including massacres of civilians.

With U.S. antidrug and counterterrorism support through Plan Colombia, President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) of the conservative Democratic Center party rebuilt the Colombian military and weakened the FARC, although some security forces and allied paramilitaries continued to commit serious human rights abuses during his administration.⁶ On November 11, 2024, the State Department sanctioned former General Mario Montoya Uribe, former commander of the Colombian military who was allegedly involved in covering up extra-judicial killings of civilians disguised as combatant deaths.⁷ With the FARC and the Colombian military having fought to a virtual stalemate, President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) launched secret talks with the FARC, formerly the largest and most powerful insurgent group in the Western Hemisphere, in 2011 that resulted in the signing of a historic 2016 peace accord.⁸

The peace accord, now part of Colombia's constitution, enabled the demobilization and disarmament of more than 13,000 FARC fighters (roughly 800 dissidents refused to disarm) but proved controversial; its opponents included former President Uribe's and Santos' successor, Iván Duque (2018-2022).⁹ The accord included provisions on rural development; the FARC's demobilization, disarmament, and subsequent political participation; illicit crops and drug trafficking; victims' reparations and transitional justice; and verification that programs in the accord are implemented.¹⁰ By 2021, slow implementation of the accord's stipulations and a

⁵ The *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) is estimated to have had as many as 20,000 members and to have controlled more than a third of Colombia's territory at its peak power in 2002. The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), generally much smaller, was estimated to have had roughly 4,500 members in 2000 but may have increased its size to 6,000 members today as it has operations in both Venezuela and Colombia. The FARC and ELN battled the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) and, from 2005-2009, each other over drug trafficking and territory. *InSight Crime*, “National Liberation Army (ELN),” June 18, 2024, <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/eln-profile/>; *InSight Crime*, “FARC,” November 23, 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/farc-profile/>. James Bargant, “The FARC 1964-2002: From Ragged Rebellion to Military Machine,” *InSight Crime*, March 28, 2017, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/the-farc-1964-2002-from-ragged-rebellion-to-military-machine/>.

⁶ Lindsay R. Mayka, “Delegative Democracy Revisited: Colombia's Surprising Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 3 (July 2016), pp. 139-147, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/delegative-democracy-revisited-colombias-surprising-resilience/>.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, “Designation of Former Colombian General for Involvement in Gross Violations of Human Rights,” November 22, 2024.

⁸ Carlo Nasi and Angelika Rettberg, “Colombia's Farewell to Civil War,” in *How Negotiations End: Negotiating Behavior in the Endgame*, ed. I. William Zartman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁹ In October 2016, Colombians narrowly voted (50.2% to 49.8%) against approving the final peace agreement. Helen Murphy and Julia Symmes Cobb, “Colombians Reject Deal to End 52-Year FARC Rebel War,” Reuters, October 2, 2016. Following additional modifications, Colombia's Congress ratified the accord on December 1, 2016.

¹⁰ The final agreement is available in English at <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Colombia-Final-Accord-Text-in-English.pdf>.

continued lack of state presence and poverty in many areas had contributed to a resurgence in violence and other criminal activity.¹¹

Figure 1. Colombia at a Glance



Population: 52.2 million (2023, IMF estimate)

Area: 439,736 square miles, almost twice the size of Texas (CIA)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP): \$363.6 billion (2023, current prices, IMF estimate)

Real GDP Growth: 0.6% (2023, IMF), 1.1% (2024, IMF projection)

GDP Per Capita: \$6,972 (2023, current prices, IMF estimate)

Poverty Rate: 33.0% (2023, DANE)

Ethnic Groups: Mixed (Mestizo) and Caucasian (White) (86.3%), Afro-Colombian (9.3%), and Indigenous (4.4%) (Colombian National Census, 2018)

Key Trading Partners: United States (26.0%), China (14.0%), Brazil (5.2%) (2023, total trade, TDM)

Exports: \$49.5 billion total; top export partners: United States (26.4%), Panama (9.3%), China (5.0%); top export products: crude petroleum and coal, gold, and coffee (2023, TDM)

Imports: \$59.4 billion total; top import partners: United States (25.6%), China (21.6%), Brazil (6.3%); top import products: petroleum, machinery and parts, cellular phones (2023, TDM)

Legislature: Bicameral Congress: 108-member Senate and 188-member House of Representatives

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), and Trade Data Monitor (TDM).

¹¹ See, for example, Adam Isaacson, *A Long Way to Go: Implementing Colombia's Peace Accord After Five Years*, Washington Office on Latin America, November 23, 2021.

Political and Economic Situation

The Petro Government

In June 2022, Colombian voters elected former senator Gustavo Petro as president in a runoff election in which he defeated Rodolfo Hernández, a construction magnate and one-term mayor, by a 3.2% margin. President Petro is the country's first leftist president and leads a coalition of 15 leftist and center-left parties known as the *Pacto Histórico* (PH, or Historic Pact). Petro was once a member of M-19, a leftist guerilla group that demobilized in the late 1980s. He then became a leader of the political opposition and served as mayor of the Colombian capital, Bogotá (2012–2016). His vice president, Francia Márquez, is a prominent environmental activist and the country's first Afro-Colombian vice president.

In 2022, Colombian voters who supported Petro did so apparently in part out of a desire for change. Such voters reportedly had tired of lackluster growth, high unemployment and inflation, inadequate social policies, and tough policing policies that quashed protest during the Duque government.¹² Petro and Márquez presented bold social programs and initiatives to achieve peace, reduce inequality, and promote a green economy; Márquez's popularity drew support from marginalized Colombians, particularly in the Pacific Coast region.¹³

Initial Achievements

Following his election, Petro, who had surrounded himself with left-leaning loyalists as mayor, surprised observers by forging a multiparty congressional majority.¹⁴ Led by PH and including the Conservative and Liberal parties, which dominated Colombian politics in the 20th century, Petro's initial legislative coalition had 77 of 108 seats in the Colombian Senate and 145 of 188 seats in the House. Petro also named an ideologically diverse cabinet. Opposition included the rightist Democratic Center and the Radical Change parties.

In August 2022, President Petro began his term promising sweeping changes—including peace, inclusion, and environmental protection—for the disenfranchised communities who overwhelmingly supported his candidacy. Although some proposed reforms have been enacted, President Petro has yet to deliver on many of his pledges. In 2022, President Petro quickly secured enactment of a legal framework for his Total Peace program, an ambitious initiative authorizing the government to negotiate with insurgent groups deemed to have political agendas, such as the ELN, as well as major criminal organizations (see the “Security Conditions” section for further details).¹⁵ Petro also secured passage of a reform that raised government revenue through increased taxes on the wealthy and mining and oil companies, but his government has had difficulty investing this extra revenue and executing programs.¹⁶ Weak public administration

¹² Will Freeman, “Colombia Tries a Transformative Left Turn,” *Current History*, February 2023; Julia Symmes Cobb, “Colombia President Announces Policing Changes as Protest Leaders Call Off Talks,” Reuters, June 6, 2021.

¹³ Manuel Rueda and Astrid Suarez, “Colombian Voters Elect Country’s First Black Vice President,” Associated Press, June 20, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-elections-mountains-colombia-76d3fce05f6e258892094b7292bcecf>.

¹⁴ Camila Osorio, “The Colombian President’s First Year in Five Photos: A Journey from Optimism to Pessimism,” *El País*, August 8, 2023.

¹⁵ In 2023, Colombia’s Constitutional Court began hearing challenges to the Total Peace Law’s provisions for negotiating with criminal groups. The court has upheld most of the Total Peace law. Maria Alejandra Trujillo, “Colombian Constitutional Court Approves Key Provisions in Landmark Peace Law,” *BNN*, December 4, 2023.

¹⁶ Enrique Millan-Mejia and Geoff Ramsey, *Colombia’s President Must Focus on Economic Stewardship in the Second Half of His Term*, Atlantic Council, May 7, 2024.

and budget constraints also could complicate implementation of the Petro government's September 2023 drug strategy.¹⁷ With an estimated cost of \$21 billion over 10 years, the strategy prioritizes rural community assistance, voluntary crop substitution, and environmental and public health objectives over drug crop eradication.¹⁸

Setbacks and Challenges

In April 2023, President Petro reshuffled his cabinet to put loyalists in key positions; this prompted two parties, the Conservative Party and rightist "La U," to leave his congressional coalition. Nevertheless, Colombia's Congress approved Petro's four-year National Development Plan focused on land redistribution and environmental protection in May 2023 and enacted a constitutional amendment recognizing peasants' land rights and creating agrarian courts to handle rural land disputes in June 2023.

By January 2024, two additional parties had left Petro's congressional coalition; the parties in the congressional coalition after their departure hold 48 of 108 seats in the Senate and 102 of 188 seats in the House. In April 2024, Colombia's Congress rejected Petro's healthcare reform that would have expanded state control over private insurers. In June 2024, legislators passed a diluted version of a pension reform that the government had proposed as key to strengthening the state pension fund and supporting citizens who lack savings. A modified labor reform package has passed the Colombian House and is under consideration in the Colombian Senate. Legislators removed some Petro government-backed provisions that would have strengthened union rights and formalized peasant workers, but kept provisions to expand renumeration for those who work at night or on weekends and holidays and to create more categories of paid leave.¹⁹

In addition to facing pushback against some aspects of his legislative agenda, President Petro has grappled with eroding approval ratings, criminal complaints against his family and political associates, and sluggish economic growth marked by declining investment.²⁰ PH-backed candidates performed relatively poorly in October 2023 local elections, even in traditionally left-leaning cities like Bogotá. In January 2024, prosecutors charged Petro's son with accepting bribes from drug traffickers in exchange for political favors.²¹ Petro's approval rating stood at around 34% in October 2024.²²

President Petro has responded to setbacks with populist rhetoric and reform proposals. For example, he has called for the creation of a constituent assembly to reform the 1991 constitution, and he directed government regulators to take over two major public-private health insurers after

¹⁷ Gobierno de Colombia, *Política Nacional de Drogas (2023-2033)*, September 2023; Geoff Ramsey and Isabel Chiriboga, *Advancing U.S.-Colombia Cooperation on Drug Policy and Law Enforcement*, Atlantic Council, November 30, 2023.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Yenifer Rodríguez M., "Reforma Laboral en Colombia: Cambios en el Recargo Nocturno, los Contratos a Término Fijo y las Licencias Remuneradas," *El País*, October 22, 2024.

²⁰ Eitan Casaverde and Sergio Guzmán, *From Ambition to Stagnation: The Road Ahead for Petro's Administration*, Colombia Risk Analysis, August 2024, pp. 5, 19.

²¹ President Petro has denied any knowledge of these reported illicit transactions. His son is awaiting trial. *The Economist*, "Colombia's First Avowedly Left-Wing President Is Mired in Scandal," January 25, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2024/01/25/colombias-first-avowedly-left-wing-president-is-mired-in-scandal>.

²² Oscar Medina and Andrea Jaramillo, "Petro Resolves One Crisis in Colombia with Others on the Horizon," *BNN Bloomberg*, September 25, 2024.

legislators rejected his proposed health reform.²³ In October 2024, President Petro harshly criticized the national electoral council's decision to investigate the financing of his 2022 campaign.²⁴ Petro dismissed the investigation as a "coup," a term he has repeatedly used to describe actions by opponents of his administration.²⁵

As Petro has faced challenges during his term, so have leading opposition figures. In April 2024, the Colombian attorney general charged former President Uribe, once a key U.S. ally, with bribery and fraud. Uribe allegedly engaged in witness tampering to prevent disclosure of his former ties to paramilitary groups responsible for serious human rights violations; he has denied those charges.²⁶

Security Conditions

Over the past decade, the homicide rate in Colombia has remained relatively stable at less than half the rate recorded in the 1990s, but kidnappings and extortions have risen.²⁷ In 2023, Colombia recorded a homicide rate of 25.7 per 100,000 people, just above the 2012-2022 average.²⁸ Kidnapping, a source of revenue and means of territorial control for illegally armed groups, fell from 2013 to 2021 before rising in 2022 and in 2023 to affect a total of 338 victims, the highest total since 2008 but still well below conflict-era levels.²⁹ Extortion, which affects cities and rural areas and is perpetrated by armed groups and common criminals, has risen since about 2010, reaching 11,000 reported cases in 2023.³⁰

To date, the Petro administration's implementation of the 2016 peace accord and its Total Peace program have faced challenges. According to a June 2024 UN report, while Petro's administration has prioritized rural land reform and sought better coordination among entities charged with implementing the peace accord, violence committed by criminal groups against former combatants and vulnerable populations (including sexual violence and forced child recruitment) has persisted.³¹ The eighth report on peace accord implementation issued by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame found that only 32% of the accord's stipulations have been implemented, with little change in implementation since 2019.³² The report

²³ Juan Diego Quesada, "Gustavo Petro Accelerates Change in Colombia to Revive His Government," *El País*, April 4, 2024.

²⁴ "No a la Reección y la Violencia: las Claves del Acuerdo Nacional de Cristo," *La Silla Vacía*, October 4, 2024; "COLOMBIA: CNE Opens Investigation into Petro's Campaign Funding," *Latin News Daily*, October 9, 2024.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Samantha Schmidt, "Colombia's Powerful Former President Set to Become First to Stand Trial," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2024.

²⁷ UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), <https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cases of kidnapping remain well below levels recorded during the armed conflict when the FARC and ELN kidnapped people, including politicians, to earn revenue and for bargaining leverage with the government. Kyra Gurney, "Behind Colombia's Dramatic Fall in Kidnapping," *InSight Crime*, January 3, 2015. For data since 2003, see Government of Colombia, Ministry of National Defense, Vice Ministry for Defense and Security Policies, "Information on crime, operational results and crimes against the troops themselves, p. 4, https://www.mindefensa.gov.co/content/published/api/v1.1/assets/CONTF18259187BF04D1BB534C214A55E30C4/native?cb=_cache_91f&channelToken=86fd5ad8af1b4db2b56bfc60a05ec867&download=true.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ UN Security Council, *U.N. Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2024/509. Hereinafter UN Security Council, *U.N. Verification Mission in Colombia*.

³² The State Department selected and partially funds the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies to conduct monitoring and evaluation of the 2016 peace accord. See <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/barometer>.

urged the Petro administration to fully implement its 2023-2026 National Development Plan and to convene relevant entities to review and accelerate the implementation of the final agreement. The Colombian government is attempting to address these and other recommendations, in part, by developing a rapid response plan for conflict-afflicted zones.³³

According to the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, the Petro government reported that negotiations processes were under way as part of its Total Peace program with six major illegal armed groups as of June 2024.³⁴ These six armed groups include FARC splinter groups that opposed the 2016 peace accord, the ELN, and criminal groups such as the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC, or Gaitanistas, also referred to as the *Clan del Golfo* or the Gulf Clan).³⁵ The United States has designated the ELN and two FARC splinter groups as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).³⁶

Negotiations have proven complex and faced major setbacks. As military confrontations with armed groups have declined, these groups have fought each other for territorial control, massacred civilians, and carried out targeted killings of human rights defenders who have opposed their efforts (see **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**). Government negotiations with the ELN and the FARC-*Estado Mayor Central* (FARC-EMC) began in 2023 with ceasefire announcements but had broken down by August 2024. An ELN attack on a Colombian military base that killed three soldiers led President Petro to suspend talks in September 2024. The talks resumed in early November, but then the ELN killed four soldiers later in the month.³⁷

Talks between the Petro government and the *Segunda Marquetalia*—another splinter group of former FARC guerrillas—began in June 2024, and the government announced talks with the AGC in August 2024.³⁸ Some analysts have urged the Petro government to focus on reaching partial agreements with groups committed to the process, even if only in certain regions.³⁹ Other experts have suggested that the Petro government design a military strategy to strengthen its negotiating position in talks and that its negotiators ensure that any agreements reached include provisions to guarantee that groups stop harming civilians.⁴⁰

³³ Carolina Serrano Idrovo and Laurel Quinn, “Implementation of the Colombian Final Accord Reaches the Halfway Point,” *Peace Accords Matrix Policy Brief*, No. 18, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, Keough School for Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame, 2024; UN Security Council, *U.N. Verification Mission in Colombia*; UN Security Council Meetings Coverage, “As 8-Year Mark of Colombia’s Peace Agreement Nears, Speakers in Security Council Highlight Women’s Role in Driving Implementation,” Security Council/15853, October 15, 2024.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Now the largest armed group in Colombia, the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC) is composed of former guerrillas, paramilitaries, and soldiers, among others. Its primary revenue sources include drug trafficking, extortion, and migrant smuggling. International Crisis Group, *The Unsolved Crime in “Total Peace”: Dealing with Colombia’s Gaitanistas*, March 19, 2024. Hereinafter International Crisis Group, *Total Peace*.

³⁶ The State Department removed the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) designation for the FARC in 2021. The designated splinter groups are the FARC-People’s Army (FARC-EP) and Segunda Marquetalia. U.S. Department of State, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

³⁷ Barron’s, “Guerrillas Kill Four Colombian Soldiers As Peace Efforts Falter,” November 21, 2024.

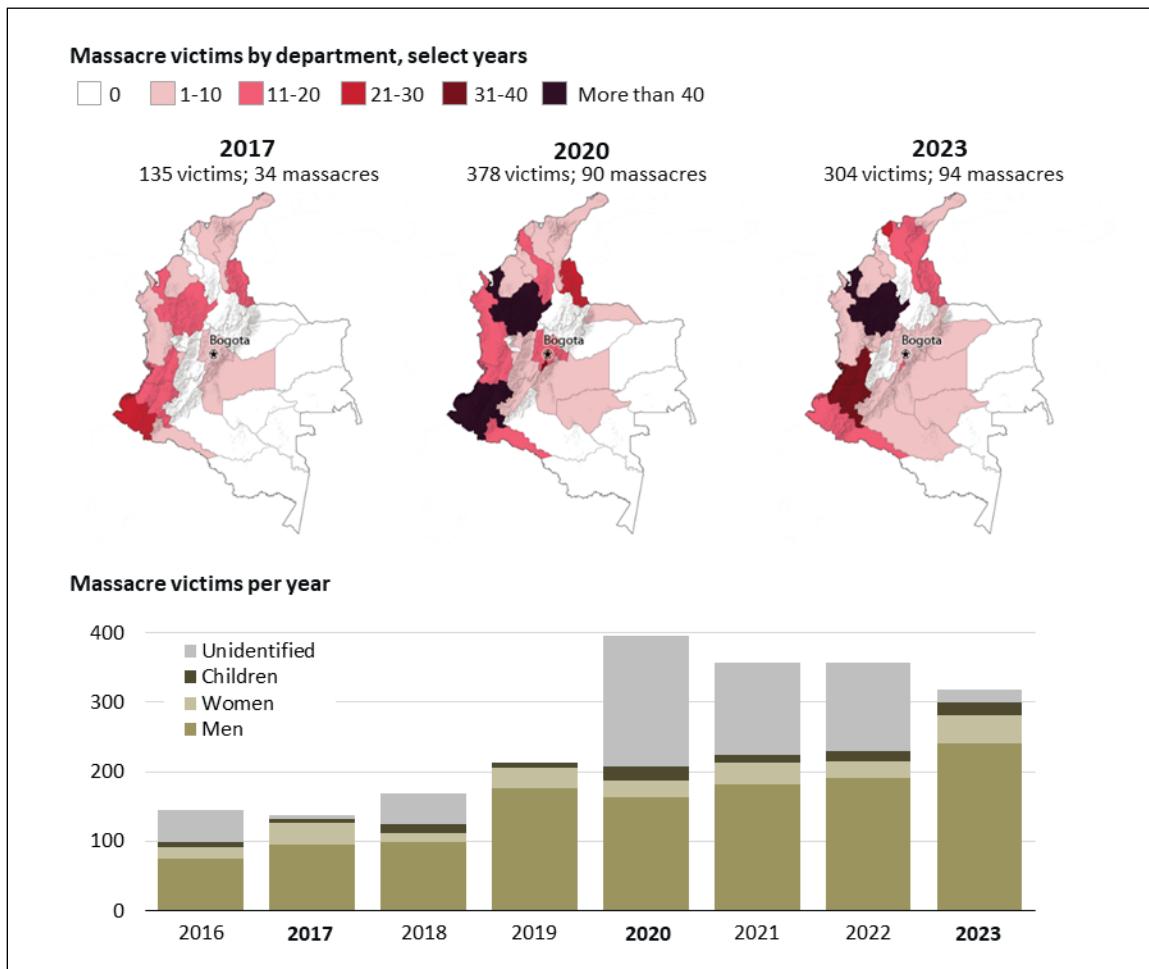
³⁸ Agence France-Presse, “Colombian Rebel Group Agrees to ‘Unilateral Ceasefire’ and Release of Captives,” June 30, 2024.

³⁹ Will Freeman and Steven Holmes, “‘Total Peace’ Is Dead: For Petro, Partial Peace Is the Best Remaining Option,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 24, 2024.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Dickinson, “Bogotá Must Pursue Dialogue with Armed Groups—and Scale Up Security for Civilians,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2024.

Figure 2. Massacres by Illegally Armed Groups in Colombia

(selected years since the signing of the 2016 peace accord)



Source: CRS, using data from Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz), accessed October 8, 2024, <https://indepaz.org.co/visor-de-masacres-en-colombia/>.

Notes: Total victims per year as shown in the maps and the chart contain slight discrepancies because of differences in sourcing. A *massacre* is defined as a homicide of three or more innocent people by the same perpetrator at the same time and place.

Human Rights

Colombia has contended with politically motivated violence and human rights abuses for much of its modern history. The 2016 peace accord created a system composed of several mechanisms to promote “truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition” of violations committed during the armed conflict.⁴¹ The entities established pursuant to the accord include a Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition Commission (Truth Commission); a unit to search for persons missing because of the armed conflict; and a Special Jurisdiction of Peace (JEP) to investigate, prosecute, and sanction “the most serious and representative” crimes committed. In exchange for recognizing their responsibility and carrying out acts of reparation in victims’ communities, perpetrators of certain

⁴¹ An English translation of the Peace Agreement is available at <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Colombian-Peace-Agreement-English-Translation.pdf>.

crimes could serve reduced sentences in non-prison settings as decided by the JEP.⁴² While all entities have taken steps to carry out their prescribed functions since the accord took effect, they have faced challenges that have slowed progress. Following are some of these developments:

- **Truth Commission Report.**⁴³ In June 2022, the Truth Commission published a report based on the testimony of some 30,000 victims of the armed conflict. The report estimated that some 450,000 people died between 1985 and 2018, 80% of whom were civilians. It attributed some 45% of these deaths to paramilitaries, 27% to guerrillas, and 12% to state agents. In addition, it estimated more than 110,000 people were forcibly disappeared (52% by paramilitaries). The FARC reportedly perpetrated 75% of the cases of forced recruitment of children and 40% of an estimated 50,000 kidnappings. The report explores the complicated economic, political, and military interests of each of the armed groups involved in the conflict and makes recommendations to avoid such a conflict from reoccurring.
- **Search Unit for Disappeared People.** Experts estimate that nearly 90,000 people remain missing as a result of the armed conflict but that many may have been buried without identification in cemeteries.⁴⁴ Within five years of its creation in 2017, the unit located 12 people alive, recovered 766 sets of human remains, and created 23 regional search teams. Some analysts assess that a lack of funding, personnel, and forensic capability, as well as the ongoing conflict in some regions, has hindered identification efforts.
- **The JEP and Emblematic Cases.** The JEP has investigated emblematic cases including forced disappearances committed by the FARC and the “false positives” scandal in which the Colombian military and paramilitaries reportedly killed more than 6,000 civilians, most between 2002 and 2008, whom they claimed were FARC combatants.⁴⁵ In 2022, FARC leaders publicly acknowledged their role in kidnapping more than 21,000 people over two decades.⁴⁶ Similarly, some former military leaders have apologized for their roles in the “false positives” killings and have begun performing public works in affected communities.⁴⁷ Still, some critics assert that the JEP has taken too long

⁴² Clara Sandoval, Hobeth Martínez-Carillo, and Michael Cruz-Rodríguez, “The Challenges of Implementing Special Sanctions (*Sanciones Propias*) in Colombia and Providing Retribution, Reparation, Participation and Reincorporation,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, vol.14, no. 2 (July 2022), pp. 478-501, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huac032>.

⁴³ Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition Commission, *There Is a Future if There Is Truth*, <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad>. A summary of the report is available in English at ABColombia, *Truth Commission of Colombia: Executive Summary*, <https://abcolombia.org.uk/truth-commission-of-colombia-executive-summary/>.

⁴⁴ Julia Symmes Cobb, “Colombia’s Cemeteries May Hold Answers for Families of Disappeared,” Reuters, August 25, 2021. The rest of this paragraph is drawn from Julia Symmes Cobb, “Searching for the Disappeared Must Be Priority at Colombia Peace Talks: Official,” Reuters, April 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/searching-disappeared-must-be-priority-colombia-peace-talks-official-2023-04-19/>.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, *Assisting Units That Commit Extrajudicial Killings: A Call to Investigate U.S. Military Policy Toward Colombia*, April 9, 2008.

⁴⁶ Anna Myriam Roccatello, “What Does a Heart-Felt Apology from FARC Mean for Colombia?” International Center for Transition Justice, October 1, 2020.

⁴⁷ Camila Osorio, “Colombian Military Acknowledges Extrajudicial Executions in Dabeiba: ‘I Became a Murderer,’” *El País*, June 28, 2023.

to address crimes committed during the conflict; these critics include a former army commander accused of being involved in 113 false positives.⁴⁸

Many of the most serious human rights abuses in Colombia today, including massacres of civilians, killings of human rights defenders,⁴⁹ gender-based violence, and forced child recruitment, are committed by illegally armed groups. In 2023, for example, a Colombian think tank, *Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz* (Indepaz), documented 94 massacres with more than 300 victims (**Figure 2**).⁵⁰ Similarly, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified 98 massacres in 2023, 93% committed by illegally armed groups and criminal organizations. Of the 105 targeted killings of human rights defenders that OHCHR verified in 2023, non-state armed groups were responsible for 74%. UN officials also verified more than 100 cases each of gender-based violence and forced child recruitment, both likely undercounts.

Killings of human rights defenders have disproportionately affected community action groups, ethnic leaders, peasants and small farmers, and environmental activists. In 2023, Indepaz documented 188 assassinations of human rights defenders, 26.6% of whom were from community action groups and 23% of whom were Indigenous or Afro-Colombian (see **Figure 3**).⁵¹ In prior years, up to 26.9% of all human rights defenders killed reportedly were peasants and small farmers, many of whom were concerned about land rights and the environment. Global Witness, a human rights advocacy group, recorded 79 killings of environmental activists in 2023, making Colombia the most dangerous country in the world for environmental activists that year.⁵² These killings reportedly occurred even as more than 6,400 human rights defenders received protection from the Colombian government.⁵³

⁴⁸ Andrés Bermúdez Liévano, “Colombia’s JEP Unveils Alternative Sanctions but Remains Silent on Punishment,” Justiceinfo.net, April 16, 2024; “Former Head of Colombian Army Charged in Killings of 130 Civilians,” *Washington Post*, August 20, 2023.

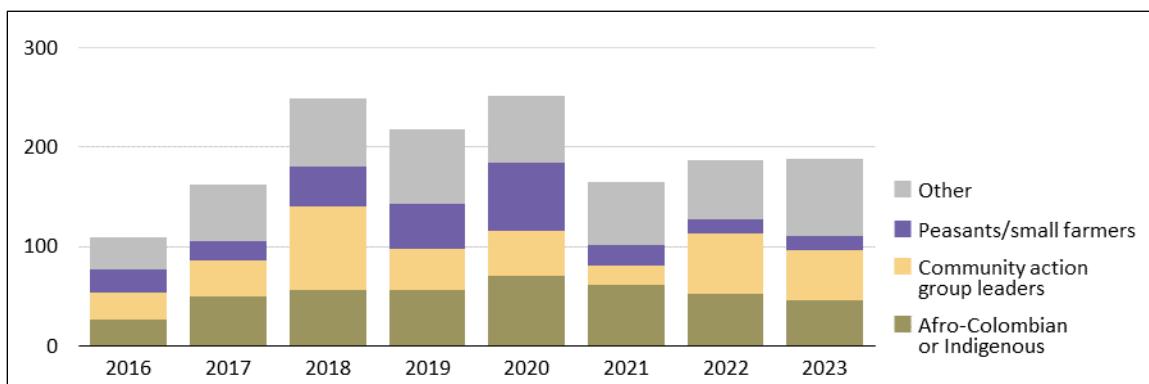
⁴⁹ The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines *human rights defender* broadly to include “any person who, individually or with others, act[s] to promote or protect human rights in a peaceful manner.” See OHCHR, “About Human Rights Defenders,” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/about-human-rights-defenders>. Unless otherwise noted, this paragraph draws from OHCHR, *Report of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Colombia*, March 2024. Hereinafter OHCHR, *Human Rights in Colombia*.

⁵⁰ Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz), “Visor de Masacres en Colombia,” <https://indepaz.org.co/visor-de-masacres-en-colombia/>.

⁵¹ Indepaz, “Visor de Asesinato a Personas Líderes Sociales y Defensores de Derechos Humanos en Colombia,” <https://indepaz.org.co/visor-de-asesinato-a-personas-lideres-sociales-y-defensores-de-derechos-humanos-en-colombia/>.

⁵² Global Witness, “More than 2,100 Land and Environmental Defenders Killed Globally Between 2012 and 2023,” September 10, 2024, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/more-2100-land-and-environmental-defenders-killed-globally-between-2012-and-2023/>.

⁵³ OHCHR, *Human Rights in Colombia*.

Figure 3. Targeted Killings of Human Rights Defenders

Source: CRS based on data from the Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz), “Visor de Asesinato a Personas Lideres Sociales y Defensores de Derechos Humanos en Colombia,” accessed October 14, 2024, <https://indepaz.org.co/visor-de-asesinato-a-personas-lideres-sociales-y-defensores-de-derechos-humanos-en-colombia/>.

Notes: According to Colombia’s interior ministry, community action groups are organizations that can represent their communities when seeking infrastructure or services from the government.

Indepaz separately documented 50 killings in 2023 of signatories of the peace accord, bringing the total number of signatories killed since 2017 (most of whom were former members of the FARC) to over 400.

OHCHR and the State Department have also documented human rights abuses by Colombian officials, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, and harsh prison conditions, in 2023.⁵⁴ According to the State Department, the Colombian inspector general’s office opened cases against alleged abuses by 39 members of Colombian security forces in 2023. In July 2023, Colombia’s attorney general indicted a Colombian National Police (CNP) colonel on homicide charges for the death of two protesters killed in large protests in 2021. These killings had prompted U.S. congressional concern about the CNP’s use of force against civilians.⁵⁵ The State Department cited the “high workload” of judges, prosecutors, and investigators as barriers to additional investigations of serious offenses by government forces.⁵⁶

The Economy

Colombia, classified by the World Bank as an upper-middle-income country, has the fourth-largest economy in Latin America; mining and energy exports have fueled economic growth. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Colombia’s economy contracted by 7.2% in 2020 but rebounded with 10.8% growth in 2021 and 7.3% growth in 2022.⁵⁷ Colombia’s economic growth rate slowed to 0.6% in 2023, according to the IMF, reportedly because of an

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Colombia*, March 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/colombia/>.

⁵⁵ CRS In Focus IF12181, *Colombia: Police Reform and Congressional Concerns*, by Rachel L. Martin and June S. Beittel.

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Colombia*, March 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/colombia/>.

⁵⁷ International Monetary Fund (IMF), “World Economic Outlook Database,” dataset for October 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October>.

interplay of factors, including inflation, political uncertainty, and high interest rates.⁵⁸ The IMF projects that gross domestic product (GDP) growth will reach 1.6% in 2024 and 2.5% in 2025.⁵⁹

Colombia continues to grapple with long-standing socioeconomic challenges. Economic growth helped reduce Colombia's poverty rate from more than 49.6% in 2005 to 28.6% in 2018, but inequality and poverty indicators have increased since 2020.⁶⁰ Poverty levels rose to 39.8% in 2020 because of the economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—which included a sharp reduction in oil exports—before declining to 33.8% in 2021, according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.⁶¹ Colombia remains a highly unequal society, including in the distribution of arable land; small farmers and ethnic communities often lack titles to their land, and ownership remains concentrated among large landholders.⁶²

President Petro has pledged to shift Colombia's economic model toward development based on renewable energy rather than mining and oil production; his government has not been approving new projects in the fossil fuel sectors. This move has hampered foreign direct investment, as oil and mining exports accounted for 55% of Colombia's goods exports and about 6% of GDP in 2022.⁶³ Domestic investment also has lagged because of concerns about inflation, increases in corporate taxes, insecurity, high interest rates, policy uncertainty, and the effects of implemented (e.g., pension) and pending (e.g., labor) reforms.⁶⁴

Humanitarian Conditions

Persistent inequality and decades of armed conflict have contributed to serious humanitarian challenges in Colombia, particularly in rural and border regions. Colombia has improved its political, economic, and social indicators in the Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index* (first issued in 2006), although indicators associated with achieving social cohesion have lagged behind those in other categories.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, humanitarian challenges associated with ongoing armed conflict, a continued lack of state presence in remote parts of the country, climate change, and an influx of nearly 3 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees since 2014 have persisted. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that some 8.3 million people in Colombia are in need of humanitarian aid.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Colombia Projection Note," *OECD Economic Outlook*, November 2023; and IMF, "World Economic Outlook Database," dataset for October 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October>.

⁵⁹ IMF, "World Economic Outlook Database," dataset for October 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October>.

⁶⁰ UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, "CEPALSTAT: Population Living in Extreme Poverty and Poverty, by Area," accessed April 10, 2024, https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html?indicator_id=3328&area_id=930&lang=en&link=cepal.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Nieves Zúñiga and Manuel Pérez Martínez, "Colombia: Context and Land Governance," LandPortal.org, October 4, 2022, <https://landportal.org/book/narrative/2022/colombia>.

⁶³ Economist Intelligence Unit, "FDI Inflows Trend Down in Colombia," January 22, 2024; and IMF, *Export Diversification in Colombia: A Way Forward and Implications for Energy Transition*, March 23, 2023.

⁶⁴ La Asociación Nacional de Empresarios de Colombia (ANDI), *Balance 2023, Perspectivas 2024*, January 2024.

⁶⁵ Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index: 2024, Country Dashboard: Colombia*, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>.

⁶⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Response Plan for Community Priorities: 2024-2025*, March 2024. Hereinafter OCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan*.

Following are some of the major humanitarian challenges in Colombia:

- **Supporting conflict victims.** Since 1985, some 9.5 million individuals have registered with the government’s Victim’s Unit as victims of the armed conflict; 90% are internally displaced persons.⁶⁷
- **Protecting communities affected by illegally armed groups.** According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, armed conflicts displaced 145,000 individuals—including more than 50,000 groups of 10 or more families—and “confined” 47,000 individuals to the areas where they resided. Humanitarian access to serve these individuals and communities is difficult.⁶⁸
- **Addressing food insecurity.** Some 15.5 million people in Colombia, especially in rural areas, were estimated to lack sufficient access to food in 2023.⁶⁹
- **Providing basic services for people who lack them.** Some 3.2 million people in Colombia lack access to potable water, and 78% of municipalities have limited access to health services.⁷⁰
- **Preparing for environmental issues** Colombia is vulnerable to natural disasters, particularly flooding, which UN experts assert has been exacerbated by climate change. UN estimates indicate that some 2.9 million people are at risk of losing their livelihoods as a result.⁷¹
- **Addressing Migration.** In addition to sheltering nearly 3 million Venezuelans, more than 520,000 irregular migrants passed through Colombia in 2023 to access the Darién Gap into Panama, a stretch of dense rainforest along Colombia’s border with Panama.⁷²

Foreign Policy

President Gustavo Petro has sought to establish a foreign policy that is less closely aligned with that of the United States and the European Union—Colombia’s first- and third-ranked trade partners and largest foreign aid donors—than in the past. According to some analysts, Petro has aimed to establish a policy of “strategic ambiguity” regarding his government’s foreign policy positions in an effort to elevate Colombia’s global prestige as a “middle power” like Brazil, but it is not clear that this strategy has yet borne fruit.⁷³ As an example, Petro’s government has welcomed continued investment from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in infrastructure, technology, and railroads and is considering joining China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Some

⁶⁷ In 2011, Colombia’s Congress enacted a Victim’s Law to establish a single registry of conflict victims, thereby unifying past databases to collect data on such victims and to inform the development of government policies to serve them.

⁶⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, *Colombia: Humanitarian Report 2024*, March 2024.

⁶⁹ VAM Unit: Colombia, “2023: Food Security Assessment of Colombian Population: Executive Summary,” World Food Programme, March 3, 2023, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2023-food-security-assessment-colombian-population-executive-summary>.

⁷⁰ OCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan*.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Regional Inter-agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), “Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela,” updated June 3, 2024, <https://www.r4v.info/en/refugeeandmigrants>. Data for the Darién Gap are available at <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/>.

⁷³ Amelia Thoreson and Sergio Guzmán, “Colombia’s Aspiration to Become a Middle Power Shakes Up its Foreign Policy,” *Global Americans*, August 15, 2024.

analysts assess that it has done so without developing a strategy toward the PRC that considers the privacy and national security ramifications of such investment in strategic sectors.⁷⁴ Petro seeks to be a global leader on environmental issues and hosted the 16th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in October 2024. Some observers assess that his government has reportedly not adequately funded environmental protection agencies.⁷⁵

Some of President Petro's positions on key foreign policy issues have largely aligned with those of the Biden Administration, while others have diverged. Colombian and U.S. foreign policies have most closely aligned on finding a democratic solution to the ongoing political crisis in Venezuela. The Biden Administration has sought to use Petro as an intermediary between the United States and Venezuela (see “Cooperation on Venezuela”). With respect to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Petro government voted for a September 2022 UN resolution defending Ukraine’s territorial integrity and a February 2023 UN resolution calling for Russia’s withdrawal from Ukraine. In contrast, the Petro government’s position on the Israel-Hamas conflict has differed from that of the United States. President Petro has severed diplomatic ties with Israel and criticized the Israeli government on social media using rhetoric that some have characterized as antisemitic.⁷⁶ Petro’s decision to break diplomatic ties with Israel prompted criticism from several Members of Congress.⁷⁷ The Colombian military continues to rely on some Israeli-made military equipment, however, and it is unclear how the breaking of diplomatic ties may affect the 2020 Israel-Colombia free-trade agreement (FTA).⁷⁸

U.S.-Colombia Relations

Over the past two decades, the United States and Colombia have forged a close partnership. Founded on mutual security objectives, such as combating narcotics trafficking and countering insurgencies, the relationship has broadened over time to include cooperation on addressing human rights abuses, trade and economic development, migration, and environmental conservation. These efforts have been shaped by a security strategy known as Plan Colombia, its successor strategies, and implementation of the 2016 peace accord. Bilateral activities—especially those related to security—have been supported by successive U.S. Administrations, often with bipartisan support from Congress. In April 2023, Presidents Biden and Petro met at the White House to promote “bilateral cooperation on issues of mutual interest, including climate change, clean energy transition, migration, drug trafficking, and peace.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Christian Heinze, Sergio Guzmán, and Daniel Poveda, *Understanding China’s Tech Footprint in Colombia: Challenges and Opportunities*, December 2023; Igor Patrick, “China Invites Colombia to Join Belt and Road Initiative, ‘Exploring’ Free-Trade Agreement,” *South China Morning Post*, October 18, 2024; CRS In Focus IF11735, *China’s “One Belt, One Road” Initiative: Economic Issues*, by Karen M. Sutter, Andres B. Schwarzenberg, and Michael D. Sutherland.

⁷⁵ Olga L. González, “Petro’s Environmental Record Is Full of Contradictions,” *Americas Quarterly*, March 25, 2024.

⁷⁶ Genevieve Glatsky, “Colombia to Sever Ties with Israel over Gaza War,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2024; American Jewish Committee, “Five Ways Colombia’s President Is Spreading Antisemitism and Destroying His Nation’s Ties with the U.S. and Israel,” September 19, 2024.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar, “Salazar and Latino-Jewish Caucus Condemn Colombian President Petro’s Decision to Cut Ties with Israel,” press release, May 3, 2024; Rafael Bernal, “Colombia to Cut Diplomatic Ties with Israel,” *The Hill*, May 1, 2024.

⁷⁸ Astrid Suárez, “Colombia Breaks Diplomatic Ties with Israel, But Its Military Relies on Key Israeli-Built Equipment,” Associated Press, May 3, 2024.

⁷⁹ White House, “Joint Statement from the United States and Colombia Following the Bilateral Meeting Between President Joe Biden and President Gustavo Petro,” April 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/> (continued...)

President Biden referred to Colombia as a “keystone” partner in the Western Hemisphere.⁸⁰ In May 2024, U.S. and Colombian officials convened the 11th High-Level Dialogue to reaffirm 202 years of diplomatic relations and to launch a new “Vida Colombia” strategy.⁸¹ The strategy builds on existing bilateral efforts to promote hemispheric cooperation on democratic stability, environmental protection, socio-ecological transition, implementation of the peace accord, countering of crime and narcotics, humane migration management, and the inclusion of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups. Implementation of the dialogue’s mandates and Vida Colombia is continuing through working groups that include the private sector and civil society. At the same time, President Petro’s foreign policy positions, social media posts, and criticism of U.S. drug policy have sometimes strained U.S.-Colombia relations.⁸²

U.S. Foreign Assistance

Colombia has been among the top recipients of U.S. foreign assistance worldwide since the FY2000 launch of Plan Colombia. The focus of U.S. assistance efforts has changed over time, responding to changes in Colombia’s long-running internal armed conflict and Colombian government priorities. U.S. assistance to Colombia, managed by the U.S. Department of State, concentrates largely on counternarcotics and security support, including training Colombian military and police and supporting humanitarian demining efforts.⁸³ The State Department also supports efforts to strengthen Colombia’s judicial system, diversify trade, counter terrorism, and promote human rights and democracy. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) focuses on helping the Colombian government consolidate peace in formerly war-torn rural communities to foster increased investment, provide basic public services, and advance citizen security and reconciliation.

President Petro has criticized U.S. drug policy, adopted a drug strategy deemphasizing coca eradication, and implemented some policy changes that some critics assert eroded some of Colombia’s military capabilities.⁸⁴ His government has continued to work with the United States on intelligence sharing, drug interdiction, and extraditions. U.S. assistance supports a range of institutions tasked with combating corruption and improving security and access to justice. The Petro government has asked for more U.S. assistance to help implement all aspects of the 2016 peace accord, including the Ethnic Chapter, which aims to address past inequities against

statements-releases/2023/04/20/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-colombia-following-the-bilateral-meeting-between-president-joe-biden-and-president-gustavo-petro/.

⁸⁰ White House, “Remarks by President Biden and President Gustavo Petro of Colombia Before Bilateral Meeting,” April 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/20/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-gustavo-petro-of-colombia-before-bilateral-meeting/>.

⁸¹ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on the XI High Level Dialogue Colombia – United States,” May 29, 2024.

⁸² See, for example, Reuters, “U.S. Slams Colombia President’s Remarks on Gaza,” October 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-slams-colombia-presidents-remarks-gaza-2023-10-12/>; Cynthia J. Arnson, “A Growing Rift in the U.S.-Colombia Relationship,” *Americas Quarterly*, August 7, 2024.

⁸³ Some State Department assistance is implemented by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). DOD implements assistance provided through the Foreign Military Financing and International Military Education and Training accounts.

⁸⁴ Alfonso Camacho-Martinez, “By Weakening the Military, Colombia’s Petro Imperils His Hopes for Peace,” *War on the Rocks*, August 1, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/08/by-weakening-the-military-colombias-petro-imperils-his-hopes-for-peace/>.

Indigenous people and Afro-Colombians and protect their rights in the future.⁸⁵ The Biden Administration allocated an estimated \$453.1 million of assistance for Colombia in FY2023 (see **Table 1**).⁸⁶ USAID obligated an additional \$106.5 million in FY2023 to fund humanitarian assistance for internally displaced persons, food and other assistance for Venezuelan migrants in Colombia and communities sheltering them, and programs to build community resistance to conflict and disasters.⁸⁷

Table 1. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Colombia by Account: FY2020-FY2025 Request
(in thousands of current U.S. dollars)

Account	FY2020 (Actual)	FY2021 (Actual)	FY2022 (Actual)	FY2023 (Estimate)	FY2024 (Request)	FY2025 (Request)
DA	61,000	70,000	80,000	86,000	103,000	90,500
ESF	146,328	154,100	147,000 ^a	144,000	122,000	128,500
GHP (State)	1,500	1,747	2,861	2,971	—	—
GHP (USAID)	3,000	1,970	9,000	8,750	9,000	8,750
INCLE	180,000	189,000	189,000	150,000	160,000	135,000
IMET	1,783	1,850	1,476	1,850	2,000	2,000
FMF	45,525	38,525	40,000	38,525	38,025	38,525
NADR	21,000	21,000	21,000	21,000	10,000	10,000
Total	460,200	478,192^a	490,337^b	453,096	444,025	413,275

Sources: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification, Supplementary Tables-Foreign Operations, FY2020-FY2025 and U.S. Department of State, FY2023 estimate data, August 2023.

Notes: DA = Development Assistance; ESF = Economic Support Fund; GHP = Global Health Programs; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; IMET = International Military Education and Training; FMF = Foreign Military Financing; NADR = Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related programs.

- a. This sum includes \$14.8 million of ESF appropriated through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2).
- b. This sum includes \$15.0 million of ESF appropriated through the Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-128).

The Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47, Division F), and accompanying explanatory statement designate at least \$377.5 million for Colombia, subject to certain restrictions and withholding conditions. That total is \$66.5 million (15%) lower than the \$444.0 million that the Administration had requested for Colombia in FY2024. An earlier FY2024 SFOPS bill that was passed by the House, H.R. 4665, did not designate a funding level for Colombia; the accompanying report, H.Rept. 118-146, stated that the Committee was deferring consideration of funding for Colombia because of concerns about the current Colombian government. The initial version of the SFOPS bill reported in the

⁸⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Colombian Vice President Francia Marquez at a Signing Ceremony to Support the Comprehensive Implementation of the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 Peace Accord,” October 3, 2022.

⁸⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Operations, Appendix 2, Fiscal Year 2025*, April 2024.

⁸⁷ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, “Colombia: Assistance Overview,” May 2024.

Senate, S. 2438, would have provided \$487.4 million for Colombia. U.S. humanitarian assistance to Colombia in FY2024 totaled \$72.6 million as of May 2024.⁸⁸

For FY2025, the Biden Administration requested \$413.3 million for Colombia to support ongoing counternarcotics efforts, continued implementation of the Colombian government's 2016 peace accord, Venezuelan migrant integration, and environmental programs, among other goals. Compared with the FY2023 estimated allocation, the Administration's FY2025 budget request would reduce aid to Colombia by \$39.8 million (8.8%).

Congress has not completed action on the FY2025 budget request. The House-passed version of the FY2025 SFOPS measure (H.R. 8771/H.Rept. 118-554) would provide at least \$208.5 million for Colombia. The total may not be comprehensive, however, as the report does not designate specific funding levels for Colombia under the Global Health Programs; Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs; or International Military Education and Training accounts, through which Colombia received \$34.6 million in aid for FY2023. The bill would reduce Development Assistance (DA), Economic Support Fund (ESF), and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funding by 50% compared to the FY2024 enacted level because of President Petro's "detrimental policies and relationships" that "are at odds with American security and economic interests."⁸⁹ The bill would impose several restrictions and conditions on aid to Colombia, including limitations related to counternarcotics efforts.⁹⁰

The Senate-introduced version of the FY2025 SFOPS measure (S. 4797/S.Rept. 118-200) would provide "not less than" \$380 million for Colombia. S. 4797 would stipulate that of the appropriated INCLE assistance, not less than \$40 million shall be made available for rural security in municipalities affected by coca production or other illicit industries. S.Rept. 118-200 would designate \$15 million in DA for biodiversity programs in Colombia, \$25 million in ESF for Afro-Colombians and Indigenous communities, and \$15 million in ESF for human rights programming.⁹¹ The bill also would require the State Department to withhold 20% of INCLE aid for Colombia until the Secretary of State certifies that the Colombian government is implementing certain counternarcotics policies and to withhold 20% of Foreign Military Financing for Colombia until the Secretary certifies that the Colombian government has met certain human rights conditions.⁹²

Defense and Security Cooperation

Colombia is one of the United States' most important defense partners in Latin America and the Caribbean. In May 2022, President Biden designated Colombia as a major non-NATO ally for the purposes of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (22 U.S.C. §§2151 et seq.), and the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ H.Rept. 118-554, pp. 115-116.

⁹⁰ H.R. 8771 would prohibit the use of any assistance for reparation payments, agrarian cash subsidies, or compensation to demobilized combatants outlined in Colombia's 2016 peace accord or for alternative development projects on properties where illegal substances are grown, produced, imported, or distributed. Prior to the obligation of any funds for Colombia, the bill would require the Secretary of State to submit a report to the House Appropriations and Foreign Affairs Committees and the Senate Appropriations and Foreign Relations Committees on the status of U.S.-Colombia relations, including an analysis of the extent to which the Colombian government is aligned with the United States on various issues. The bill also would require the State Department to withhold 30% of the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement assistance made available for Colombia, until the Secretary of State certifies that the Colombian government has reduced overall coca cultivation, production, and trafficking and has continued cooperating with the United States on joint counternarcotics strategies and extraditions in the previous 12 months. H.R. 8771 §7045(c).

⁹¹ S.Rept. 118-200, pp. 41, 44.

⁹² S. 4797, §7045(c)(2).

Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. §§2751 et seq.).⁹³ That designation grants Colombia privileged access to U.S. military training, equipment, and cooperative research and development projects, among other benefits.⁹⁴ In November 2022, Colombian Defense Minister Iván Velázquez and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met to reaffirm their commitment to U.S.-Colombia security cooperation and the importance of Colombia's role in promoting security in the Western Hemisphere and globally.⁹⁵ The July 2024 Defense Bilateral Working Group meeting addressed emerging challenges (cyber, climate change, and counter-unmanned aerial systems); improving regional security cooperation; building defense sector institutions; countering transnational criminal organizations; and strengthening information-related capabilities.⁹⁶ Border security has emerged as another prominent focus of bilateral security cooperation, as irregular migration has increased through the Darién Gap region between Colombia and Panama.

Colombia receives the bulk of all Department of Defense (DOD) training and equipment provided to Latin America and the Caribbean, and also benefits from embedded U.S. advisors working on the modernization of military personnel, intelligence, and broader institutional practices. DOD provides training and equipment, among other support, through multiple accounts, the largest of which are authorized under Title 10, Section 333, of the *U.S. Code* for building the capacity of foreign security forces. In compliance with Leahy Law vetting requirements (22 U.S.C. §2378d), U.S. agencies continue to vet individuals and units for potential human rights abuses prior to delivering training and/or equipment.⁹⁷ In FY2024, \$15 million of the total \$28.7 million in Section 333 funds provided to Colombia supported training for Colombian pilots and maintenance on U.S.-provided rotary-wing aircraft.⁹⁸ DOD has invested more than \$10 million to help Colombia's military conduct humanitarian demining.⁹⁹ In addition to addressing security objectives, U.S. and Colombian forces collaborate on humanitarian programs to provide emergency assistance and infrastructure to vulnerable communities. DOD has donated 10 rapidly deployable emergency response bridges to help the Colombian military deliver emergency assistance rapidly in the event of a disaster.¹⁰⁰

Colombia has become a key implementer of U.S. security assistance programs and a leader of multinational maritime interdiction operations.¹⁰¹ Through the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation, Colombian police and military officers have trained more than 50,000 police and other individuals from across the region since 2013.¹⁰² In May 2024, General

⁹³ White House, "Memorandum on the Designation of Colombia as a Major Non-NATO Ally," Presidential Determination No. 2022-14, May 23, 2022.

⁹⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Major Non-NATO Ally Status," fact sheet, <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>.

⁹⁵ David Vergun, "U.S.-Colombia Defense Leaders to Discuss Security, Migration, Climate Change," *DOD News*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3231171/us-colombia-defense-leaders-to-discuss-security-migration-climate-change/>.

⁹⁶ U.S. DOD, "Readout of the 19th Annual U.S.-Colombia Defense Bilateral Working Group," press release, August 6, 2024.

⁹⁷ CRS In Focus IF10575, *Global Human Rights: Security Forces Vetting ("Leahy Laws")*, by Michael A. Weber.

⁹⁸ CRS correspondence with DOD, October 29, 2024.

⁹⁹ Colombian territory remains full of unexploded landmines. DOD has provided land demining tools and equipment, communications equipment, and personal protective gear to the Colombian military. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ In July 2024, the Colombian Navy led Operation Orion, a 62-nation, 45-day operation that resulted in drug seizures worth \$4.9 billion. CRS correspondence with U.S. Department of State, October 21, 2024.

¹⁰² CRS correspondence with U.S. Department of State, October 21, 2024.

Laura J. Richardson, Commander of U.S. Southern Command, met with President Petro and high-level Colombian military officials to discuss U.S.-Colombia defense cooperation.¹⁰³

Efforts Against Illegal Drugs and Organized Crime

For decades, controlling the flow of cocaine from Colombia to the United States has been a top congressional goal, albeit one that has been difficult to achieve given U.S. demand and cocaine's role as a primary source of revenue for criminal and illegally armed groups. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cocaine resulted in more than 29,918 estimated U.S. overdose deaths in 2023, up from 28,441 in 2022.¹⁰⁴ Some 97% of cocaine in the United States originates in Colombia.¹⁰⁵ According to the U.S. Department of State, Colombia remains a committed U.S. counternarcotics partner and a regional leader in drug interdiction, but coca cultivation and potential cocaine production in the country reached record levels in 2023.¹⁰⁶ Although coca cultivation has been increasing for more than a decade since the end of aerial spraying, the Petro government's drug policy, which emphasizes alternative-livelihoods programs over eradication, has apparently exacerbated that trend.¹⁰⁷

Other sources of illicit revenue for criminal organizations and illegally armed groups involved in cocaine trafficking include extortion, illicit mining, illegal logging, and alien smuggling. With gold prices at record levels, such groups have expanded their involvement in illicit mining, often in areas where coca crops are cultivated.¹⁰⁸ Illicit mining is associated with environmental destruction, human trafficking, and money laundering.¹⁰⁹ Illegal logging and deforestation in some regions are also closely correlated with coca cultivation; some activities conducted on illegally cleared land (including cattle ranching) are used as fronts for laundering drug profits.¹¹⁰ Illicit mining, logging, and drug trafficking have wrought particular damage in remote areas of the Amazon near Colombia's borders with Brazil and Peru.¹¹¹ While deforestation declined in 2023, many experts assert that the decline did not occur because of government efforts but as a result of the FARC-EMC prohibiting deforestation in areas under its control (as the FARC used to

¹⁰³ U.S. Southern Command Public Affairs Office, "Gen. Richardson Visits Colombia," May 31, 2024, <https://www.southcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/3794665/gen-richardson-visits-colombia/>.

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, "U.S. Overdose Deaths Decrease in 2023, First Time Since 2018," May 15, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR): Colombia*, March 2024, vol. 1, p. 135. Hereinafter *INCSR: Colombia*.

¹⁰⁶ *INCSR: Colombia*, p. 135; UNODC, *Colombia: Monitoreo de los Territorios con Presencia de Cultivos de Coca 2023*, October 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Coca cultivation rose significantly after the Colombian Constitutional Court prohibited aerial spraying of coca crops with glyphosate in 2015 due to related health concerns raised by the World Health Organization and the policy's lack of prior consultation with ethnic communities. See, for example, Luis Jaime Acosta and Oliver Griffin, "Colombia Court Upholds Conditions for Restarting Aerial Coca Fumigation," Reuters, July 18, 2019. Petro's drug policy aims to foster community agriculture projects and build infrastructure to get crops to markets. Observers have questioned whether the government can obtain the necessary domestic and foreign investment to implement its strategy and whether it has the capacity to implement such a complicated strategy involving multiple institutions. Lara Loiza, "The Opportunities and Pitfalls of Colombia's Ambitious New Drug Policy," *InSight Crime*, September 12, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ UNODC, *Colombia: Explotacion de Oro de Aluvion: Resumen Ejecutivo: 2022*, pp. 2,4.

¹⁰⁹ Sofia Gonzalez, Sophia Cole, and Ian Gary, *Dirty Money and Destruction of the Amazon*, The Fact Coalition, 2003, pp. 53-54.

¹¹⁰ Perla Rivadeneyra, Luisa Scaccia, and Luca Salvati. "A Spatial Regression Analysis of Colombia's Narcodeforestation with Factor Decomposition of Multiple Predictors," *Scientific Reports*, vol. 13 (2023), Article 13485, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-40119-3>.

¹¹¹ International Crisis Group, *A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, Latin America Briefing No. 51, July 17, 2024.

do).¹¹² Groups, such as the AGC, have earned billions by maintaining alien smuggling routes to and through the Darién Gap.¹¹³

In July 2024, the U.S. and Colombian governments agreed to new metrics to measure the effectiveness of bilateral efforts to address cocaine trafficking while also providing “security, justice, and licit economic opportunities” in targeted communities most affected by illicit flows of drugs and crime.¹¹⁴ The metrics include traditional measures, such as the number of hectares dedicated to coca production that have since been eradicated, an indicator that declined by 70% from 2022 to 2023 to 20,000 hectares.¹¹⁵ While eradication has declined, seizures (another traditional metric) have increased. In 2023, Colombian police seized more than 841 metric tons of cocaine and cocaine base, a 10% increase from 2022.¹¹⁶ Security forces also dismantled 12% more labs than in the prior year.¹¹⁷ Arrests and extraditions of drug kingpins have continued; Colombia remains one of the “most cooperative” U.S. extradition partners, according to the U.S. Department of State.¹¹⁸ In 2023, Colombia opened a U.S.-backed, multinational Joint Group Against Organized Crime unit that is enabling law enforcement from several South American countries to share intelligence and facilitate arrests.¹¹⁹

Newer metrics reflect a broader view of combating drugs and criminality while promoting rural development and state presence in targeted communities. The metrics include the number of U.S.-trained police posted in rural areas, hectares of land that have been titled, hectares under improved conservation management, and environmental crimes prosecuted. Some analysts argue that these metrics complement the peace accord’s aims, support environmental protection, and target a broader range of crimes.¹²⁰

These metrics reflecting efforts in Colombia could be complemented by data on the number of individuals and/or entities with a connection to Colombia who have been subject to U.S. drug-related asset blocking or visa sanctions.¹²¹ To date, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has imposed drug-trafficking-related financial sanctions on more than 164 individuals and 188 entities tied to Colombia.¹²²

USAID has pointed to evidence that, under alternative-livelihoods programs, communities that have received land titles in exchange for removing their illicit crops have much lower recidivism (return to coca cultivation) rates than other communities, highlighting the approach as a model that the Colombian government could replicate.¹²³ With coca prices low amidst oversupply, some

¹¹² Joshua Collins, “Armed Groups as Forest Protectors in Colombia: A Risky Dynamic,” *Sierra*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/armed-groups-forest-amazon-protectors-colombia-risky-dynamic>.

¹¹³ International Crisis Group, *Total Peace*.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Embassy in Colombia, “Joint Statement on U.S.-Colombia Holistic Strategy Updated Metrics,” July 26, 2024.

¹¹⁵ INCSR: *Colombia*, pp. 135-136.

¹¹⁶ White House, “Memorandum on Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2024,” September 15, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/09/15/memorandum-on-presidential-determination-on-major-drug-transit-or-major-illicit-drug-producing-countries-for-fiscal-year-2024/>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ CRS correspondence with the U.S. Department of State, October 21, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Steven Hendrix, “It’s Time to Rethink U.S.-Colombia Relations,” *Americas Quarterly*, September 30, 2024.

¹²¹ For background on sanctions related to international drug trafficking, see CRS In Focus IF10909, *U.S. Sanctions: Targeting International Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking*, by Liana W. Rosen.

¹²² Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, “Sanctions List Search,” <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/>.

¹²³ CRS communication with USAID, October 28, 2024.

analysts assert that this may be a good time to launch large-scale alternative-livelihoods programs funded by a multilateral trust fund and complemented by robust interdiction, dismantling of transnational criminal organization networks, and efforts against money laundering and financial crimes.¹²⁴

Each year, Congress requires the President to identify “major illicit drug producing” and/or “major drug transit” countries (22 U.S.C. §2291j-1); a subset of these countries may be subject to U.S. foreign assistance restrictions. For FY2025, Colombia is 1 of 23 such countries identified by President Biden.¹²⁵ President Biden certified that Colombia is making adequate steps to combat drug trafficking. If a subsequent U.S. administration were to determine that the country “failed demonstrably” to meet international and U.S. standards for counternarcotics efforts pursuant to 22 U.S.C. §2291j-1, then it could consider whether or not to grant a national interest waiver.¹²⁶ Absent a national interest waiver, certain foreign aid to Colombia could then be prohibited pursuant to Section 706 of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 2003 (P.L. 107-228; 22 U.S.C. §2291j-1). (See “U.S. Foreign Assistance.”)

Migration Collaboration

Colombia has received U.S. humanitarian and development assistance as it has become the destination for roughly 2.8 million of the 7.8 million total migrants and refugees who have fled Venezuela since 2014.¹²⁷ Since FY2018, U.S. humanitarian assistance for Venezuelan migrants and Colombian host communities has totaled roughly \$697 million, with emergency food assistance prioritized and complemented by nutrition and job creation programs.¹²⁸ Colombia has also received about \$250 million in development assistance to help Venezuelan migrants—approximately 2.2 million of whom have received temporary protected status in Colombia—integrate into Colombian society.¹²⁹ In September 2024, the Colombian government announced the signing of a decree that could grant legal status to up to 600,000 Venezuelan migrants who are guardians of minors living in Colombia.¹³⁰

Colombia is a signatory of the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, an agreement among Western Hemisphere governments to promote collaboration and burden sharing in managing migration flows. Colombia is taking over the rotating chair of the Los Angeles Declaration and has committed to hosting the next ministerial meeting in 2025. Colombia also hosts safe mobility offices where certain migrants can apply for lawful migration pathways to enter the United States and other countries.¹³¹

¹²⁴ Geoff Ramsey and Isabel Chiriboga, *Advancing U.S.-Colombia Cooperation on Drug Policy and Law Enforcement*, Atlantic Council, November 30, 2023.

¹²⁵ White House, “Memorandum on Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2024,” September 15, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/09/15/memorandum-on-presidential-determination-on-major-drug-transit-or-major-illicit-drug-producing-countries-for-fiscal-year-2024/>.

¹²⁶ The term “failed demonstrably” is described in 22 U.S.C. §2291j-1.

¹²⁷ R4V, “Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela,” updated June 3, 2024, <https://www.r4v.info/en/refugeeandmigrants>.

¹²⁸ USAID, “Venezuela Regional Crisis,” Fact Sheet #3, FY2024, May 31, 2024.

¹²⁹ R4V, “Residence Permits and Regular Stay Granted,” updated August 25, 2023; CRS correspondence with USAID official, October 4, 2024.

¹³⁰ White House, “Fact Sheet: Fourth Ministerial Meeting on the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection,” September 26, 2024.

¹³¹ For more information, see CRS Insight IN12159, *Post-Title 42: U.S. Foreign Policy Initiatives to Manage Regional Migration*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Peter J. Meyer. See also <https://movilidadsegura.org/en/colombia/>.

Colombia is working with the United States and Panama to stem irregular migrant flows, though President Petro has expressed doubts that the Colombian government can stop migrants determined to reach the United States.¹³² The AGC reportedly controls migrant smuggling into and through the Darién Gap, which borders a region of Colombia that lacks state presence.¹³³ On July 1, 2024, the Biden Administration signed a memorandum of understanding with newly inaugurated Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino's government to work jointly to reduce the number of migrants being smuggled through the Darién Gap.¹³⁴ Petro and Mulino also have agreed to combat human smuggling and other illicit activities in the region and improve humanitarian conditions there.¹³⁵ In August 2024, Colombia, Panama, and the United States reiterated their 2023 commitment to deter the flow of people through the Darién Gap; deterrence efforts have included the repatriation of some migrants by Panamanian officials.¹³⁶

Congress in its oversight role could monitor U.S. and Colombian policies aimed at integrating Venezuelan migrants into Colombian society, preventing irregular flows through Colombia, and protecting migrants from abuse by criminal groups. Congress could consider whether to increase, decrease, or maintain levels of support for such efforts through appropriations legislation. Congress could also consider whether or not to enact stand-alone legislation to address humanitarian conditions faced by Venezuelan migrants and the communities sheltering them, and whether or not to support migration control efforts by Colombia and other countries through which U.S.-bound migrants' transit.

Trade and Investment

The 118th Congress has expressed heightened interest in strengthening U.S. trade and investment relations with countries in the Western Hemisphere as a bulwark to expanding PRC influence in the region. If the Petro government decides to join China's Belt and Road Initiative, Congress may consider whether and, if so, how to respond. U.S.-Colombian goods trade has more than doubled since the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, an FTA signed in 2006, entered into force in 2012 (P.L. 112-42). The United States is Colombia's top trading partner, accounting for 26% of its total trade in 2023 (most recent data available).¹³⁷

In 2023, U.S.-Colombian trade in goods and services totaled \$49.9 billion, down from \$54.1 billion in 2022.¹³⁸ U.S. exports of goods and services to Colombia totaled \$26.6 billion; the top-ranked exports included industrial supplies and materials; capital goods (other than automotive); foods, feeds, and beverages; travel services (including education); and transport services. U.S. imports from Colombia totaled \$23.4 billion, led by industrial supplies and materials; foods, feeds, and beverages; transport services; consumer goods (except food and automotive); and

¹³² Julie Turkewitz and Federico Rios, “‘A Ticket to Disney’? Politicians Charge Millions to Send Migrants to U.S.,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2023.

¹³³ Henry Shuldiner and Sergio Saffon, “Colombia’s AGC Squeezes Profits from Control of Key Migration Choke Point,” *InSight Crime*, April 4, 2024.

¹³⁴ White House, “Statement from NSC Spokesperson Adrienne Watson Welcoming the Agreement with Panama to Address Irregular Migration Jointly,” July 1, 2024.

¹³⁵ CNN, “Interview with Colombian Foreign Minister Luis Gilberto Murillo,” July 4, 2024.

¹³⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Joint Statement: Trilateral on Irregular Migration,” August 26, 2024; Associated Press, “Panama Deports 29 Colombians on First US-Funded Flight,” August 20, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/panama-colombia-migrants-deportation-flight-fec09a82aa30f43b4661c63bedc2cdf>.

¹³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau and Colombia National Currency Customs Office data, as presented by Trade Data Monitor, accessed October 10, 2024.

¹³⁸ Information in this paragraph is from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Trade in Goods and Services-Colombia,” <https://apps.bea.gov/international/factsheet/factsheet.html#204>.

travel services (including education). In comparison, the UN's COMTRADE database reports that Colombia exported \$2.5 billion in goods to China and imported \$13.6 billion in goods in 2023.

In addition to its FTA with the United States, Colombia has also concluded FTAs with the European Union, Canada, and most countries in Latin America. Colombia is a founding member of the Pacific Alliance, an initiative intended to deepen economic integration with Chile, Mexico, and Peru and to serve as an export platform to the Asia-Pacific region. In April 2020, Colombia became the third Latin American member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Colombia is also participating in the Biden Administration's Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity, an initiative aimed at deepening regional economic integration, innovation, resilience, and competitiveness.¹³⁹ Some U.S. policymakers have viewed "near shoring"—the movement of manufacturing from Asia to countries closer to the United States—as a potential opportunity to expand U.S.-Colombian commercial relations; Congress could consider whether or not to enact legislation or appropriate funding to the Development Finance Corporation or the Inter-American Development Bank to further that end. The stock of U.S. foreign direct investment in Colombia stood at \$8.4 billion in 2023, up some 18.9% from 2022.¹⁴⁰

Cooperation on Venezuela

The Petro government reestablished diplomatic ties with the Maduro government of Venezuela in 2022 and has played a role in supporting international efforts to resolve the political crisis in Venezuela. In April 2023, Colombia hosted an international conference on the situation in Venezuela, during which participating countries called for the Maduro government and the opposition to resume negotiations on setting an electoral calendar. In February 2024, U.S. officials reportedly asked President Petro to consult with the Venezuelan opposition and to encourage Maduro to comply with the Barbados Accord, an agreement signed with the opposition in October 2023, to hold competitive presidential elections in 2024.¹⁴¹ In April 2024, Petro called the Maduro government's ban on the candidacy of opposition leader María Corina Machado an "anti-democratic coup" before walking back his criticism during a meeting with Maduro.¹⁴² Petro then proposed that Venezuela hold a plebiscite approving some sort of guarantees to ensure that whoever lost the presidential election on July 28, 2024, would not be politically persecuted, a condition that some analysts assert may be needed for Maduro to cede power.¹⁴³

Petro, along with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) of Brazil, has refused to recognize Maduro's fraudulent claim that he won Venezuela's 2024 presidential elections and have urged the Maduro government to release vote tallies.¹⁴⁴ Both presidents have maintained communication with Maduro and with the opposition, led by Edmundo González Urrutia (now in exile in Spain) and María Corina Machado (still in Venezuela). The United States and other countries recognize González Urrutia as the winner of the elections. Petro has not been as overtly critical of Maduro as Brazilian President Lula, perhaps because of the Maduro government's role

¹³⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity," <https://www.state.gov/americas-partnership-for-economic-prosperity/>.

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Colombia: International Trade in Goods and Services," accessed October 9, 2024.

¹⁴¹ Nicolle Yapur and Andreina Itriago Acosta, "U.S. Officials Urge Colombia to Engage with Venezuelan Opposition," *Bloomberg*, February 5, 2024.

¹⁴² Florantonio Singer and Juan Esteban Lewin, "Petro and Maduro Meet After Friction over Electoral Disqualification of María Corina Machado," *El País*, April 9, 2024.

¹⁴³ Simone Iglesias, "Petro Proposes Safeguards for Loser of Venezuela Election," *Bloomberg*, April 17, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-17/petro-proposes-safeguards-for-loser-of-venezuela-election>.

¹⁴⁴ Associated Press, "Brazil, Colombia Call on Venezuela to Release Vote Tallies," August 24, 2024.

in supporting the Colombian government's negotiations with the ELN and FARC dissidents operating in Venezuela.¹⁴⁵ While some observers hoped that Petro and Lula would be able to advance negotiations between Maduro and the opposition toward a democratic transition, Petro's and Lula's efforts have stalled.¹⁴⁶ As Maduro has ignored international pressure to negotiate with the opposition, the Colombian government has continued to assert that the elections were not free, but ceased laying the blame for that solely on Maduro.¹⁴⁷

Some Members of Congress have closely followed efforts to resolve the political crisis in Venezuela, including the positions of countries in the Western Hemisphere and around the world vis-à-vis the Maduro government and the 2024 Venezuelan elections. While the Biden Administration has supported the efforts of Brazil and Colombia to mediate a solution in Venezuela, some Members of Congress have expressed frustration about the lack of progress in those negotiations. Congress could consider whether or not to include a reporting requirement on Colombia's efforts to resolve the crisis in Venezuela and bilateral cooperation toward that end in appropriations or other legislation. Some Members of Congress may continue to closely follow security issues involving armed groups active in both countries as well as the role of the Maduro government in Colombia's Total Peace initiative.

Outlook

U.S.-Colombian relations have occasionally been tense under the Petro administration. Some experts have identified growing rifts in bilateral relations because of Petro's rhetoric and policies. Others have suggested that U.S. policymakers should consider whether or not to back a new, more holistic approach to Colombia that focuses on rural development and peace accord implementation.¹⁴⁸ Given the diversity of views on U.S.-Colombia relations within the U.S. Congress, the future of the bilateral partnership may depend, in part, on the views of the next Administration and the incoming Congress. Countering the flow of illicit narcotics from Colombia is likely to remain a priority for the U.S. government; however, the U.S. approach to achieving that objective, including Congress' consideration of foreign assistance to Colombia and conditions Congress may or may not place on that assistance, remain to be seen. Economic relations and controlling migration are also likely to remain key topics in bilateral relations. Some analysts assess that U.S. support for aspects of peace accord implementation and environmental conservation programs could wane.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ "Venezuela's Maduro Is Key to Colombia's 'Total Peace,'" *InSight Crime*, March 9, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ "Brazil Comment Says Lula 'Giving Up on Efforts in Venezuela,'" *BBC Monitoring Americas*, October 16, 2024.

¹⁴⁷ Colombia's foreign minister also blamed U.S. and European sanctions for hindering the process. "'No Fueron Libres': Canciller Sobre Elecciones en Venezuela entre Maduro y Oposición," *El Espectador*, November 22, 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Cynthia J. Arnson, "A Growing Rift in the U.S.-Colombia Relationship," *Americas Quarterly*, August 7, 2024; Steven Hendrix, "It's Time to Rethink U.S.-Colombia Relations," *Americas Quarterly*, September 30, 2024.

¹⁴⁹ Colombia Risk Analysis, *The Future of U.S.-Colombia Partnership: Impact of the 2024 Presidential Election*, September 2024.

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