

Trumping the agenda?
The continuity and discontinuity in foreign affairs between the U.S. and Colombia

Magda Catalina Jiménez
Universidad Externado de Colombia
Facultad de Finanzas, Gobierno y Relaciones Internacionales

Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón
Department of Political and International Studies
Rhodes University
&
International Institute of Social Studies
Erasmus University Rotterdam

1. Introduction

The ability of the United States (U.S.) to influence policies in Colombia is indisputable. The U.S. is Colombia's largest trading partner, and this alone provides the U.S. with great power with regards to Colombian policymaking. U.S. power is not only manifest within the economic realm, though, as Colombia is a consumer of many U.S. cultural products, but U.S. political decisions also greatly inform Colombian policymaking.

However, the nature of decisions in the U.S., and their influence, only partially explains policies in Colombia. Domestic policies also remain shaped by the configuration of different actors, agendas, and interests within the country itself.

In this chapter, we argue that although there are shifts in the agenda between both countries, we should not understand these changes as only due to the rhetoric and the style brought by the Trump government. The policy changes also relate to internal political processes within Colombia, alongside other external factors.

Whereas one might argue that there are changes with regards to policies concerning counter-narcotics, international affairs (particularly in relation to Venezuela), and military cooperation, these policies are, in fact, a continuation of long-standing policies that have only shifted in their approaches. Counter-narcotics, Venezuela, and military cooperation are indeed central to the bilateral agenda, but they have been central to this agenda for several years.

In addition, although U.S. power can be seen as diminishing in Colombia, and other countries in the region, given the growing presence of China, the influence of the U.S. is still prevalent.¹ In the case of Colombia, and given the nature of the policies and challenges that connect these two countries, U.S. power and influence remain significant. Whereas the U.S. can be understood as a hegemon in decay, it is still a hegemon, and it still wields great political and economic power, particularly in Colombia. The response and uncertainty brought by the Trump government's rhetoric is only a symptom of this decay. And so, major shifts in policy are likely. Indeed, the

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rhetoric might heighten around the issue of drug trafficking and the problem of Venezuela, but no prominent changes will take place.

These continued dynamics involving U.S.-Colombia relations are due to several reasons, including:

1. In the case of drug trafficking, some policies might shift, but as long as the U.S. does not approach their problem of drug consumption in a different way, the pressure from the U.S. to embrace more repressive means will continue as it has since the war on drugs began in the 1970s. Repression reduces the availability of drugs and increases the prices of drugs, and in theory this means drugs should be less available to consumers. This logic, however, neglects the nature of addiction, where prices remain inelastic.
2. Whereas the rhetoric around Venezuela might escalate towards war and wild dreams of a joint operation involving Colombian and U.S. forces, the reality is that the international economy and the U.S. cannot afford to maintain two simultaneous conflicts in areas that hold some of the biggest oil reserves in the world. Also the U.S. is aware that the use of military force would provide legitimacy to the Maduro regime and its claims of U.S. imperialism attacking Venezuela, in addition to the likelihood of a diplomatic response by most of the countries in Latin America rejecting a military operation in the area.

2. Friends with benefits: From war to peace building (1998-2018)

Whereas one could understand the historical relationship between the U.S. and Colombia as acrimonious due to the loss of Panama at the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship has been cordial since the loss of Panama (Tickner, 2017). From intimate cooperation on drug trafficking, to assistance with combating illicit crops, and cooperation in declarations against the Maduro government, Colombia is one of the U.S.'s closest Latin American allies.

The current relationship between Colombia and the U.S. was deepened within the Pastrana (1998-2002) and Uribe (2002-2010) administrations as part of the war on terror against the FARC-EP², ELN,³ and paramilitary forces. The design and the implementation of this cooperation was mostly framed and conceived as Plan Colombia, which included an aid package of tactical and military assistance designed "to ensure effective control over the national territory, the strengthening of democratic institutions, the pursuit of economic development and the protection of human rights. Likewise, assistance to increase counter-narcotics capabilities in Colombia, as well as improvement in the protection of human rights" (United States Agency for International Development, 2012).

Two objectives structured the plan: the enhancement of military capabilities, and the improvement in the presence and legitimacy of the government. These would be achieved by strengthening through public investment and development within the country. Between 2000 and 2006, according to the DNP,⁴ the resources invested by Plan Colombia reached \$4.8 billion USD. The effectiveness of this aid was apparent in the increase in the training and investment in

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hardware in the armed forces, including, for example, many new tactical tools (e.g. night vision goggles, enhanced infantry weaponry, laser guided bombs, helicopters (Saumeth, 2011).

This was perhaps the most effective military aid program ever undertaken by the U.S. This intervention stopped the military advances of guerrillas, forced them to change their tactics, and allowed the state to partially regain the territorial control lost in the mid-1990s to different armed groups. A forced eradication program against illicit crops was also central to this policy. Eradication aimed to deter the production of drugs by the spraying of chemicals onto the illicit crops used for producing drugs (coca and poppy crops), with the hope that this would limit the resources guerrillas would receive from taxing the production and trafficking of items related to the production and traffic of drugs.

In spite of the human and environmental costs of this policy, the use of toxic agents⁵ was effective in reducing the area of coca crops which decreased from 163,000 to 69,000 hectares between 2001 and 2016⁶. What is more, the number of intentional homicides "decreased 60% in the last 15 years, from 66 [in 2001] to 26 [in 2015] per 100,000 inhabitants" (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2016).

While the U.S. financed the military component, the state sought resources from Europe to finance the social component. The state implemented three key social development programs: "*Familias en acción*", "*Jóvenes en acción*" and "*Empleo en acción*"⁷ for which "\$1.5 Billion would be obtained through the donors roundtable that will meet in Madrid, Spain, with contributions from European and Asian countries" (El Tiempo, 2000).

Plan Colombia no doubt allowed for deeper and wider cooperation between both countries, but it also contributed to the internationalization of the Colombian conflict (Tickner, 2017). The newfound militarist approach prioritized the issue of conflict and drug trafficking, and neglected issues like the environment, human rights, and democracy promotion.

Despite military successes between 1998 and 2008, and support from both the Department of State and U.S. Congress for Plan Colombia, Barack Obama and the Democrats reduced support for the Colombian military campaign. Under Obama, the U.S. agenda shifted. U.S. state discourse changed focus from the war against terrorism, to include additional foreign policy matters, such as environmental issues and human rights.

This did not mean the U.S abandoned investment in military training or counter insurgency, but it meant that they would deploy different levers to exert influence in addition to existing ones. In the case of Colombia, this meant the use of human rights, as well as an environmental agenda, to leverage the free trade agreement negotiation process between the two countries.

When Santos was elected to the presidency in 2010 as an advocate of the continuation of a military approach to the conflict and the problem of drug trafficking, nobody was expecting Santos would shift the scope and reach of Colombian foreign policy, aiming to expand its reach and influence, while aiming to diminish the tensions with neighboring countries such as Venezuela and Ecuador, which had escalated in the Uribe years (2002-2010).

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As stated in the strategic planning program of the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the new objective was to promote “national interests through the strengthening and geographic and thematic diversification of foreign policy, prioritizing international cooperation and development of the borders” (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2014). For some Colombian academics this meant “the transition from the doctrine of *neo-respice polum* to the approach of the *neo-respice similia* (to look at others)” (Pastrana, 2011, p. 2).

The transformation of policy also took place in the domestic arena. From an agenda built around “securitization,” the government shifted the internal policy towards an approach emphasizing peace. Whereas under Uribe, Colombian foreign policy was defined by the search for peace with paramilitary groups and providing a response to the denunciation of the murder of civilians by the armed forces (called in Colombia “false positives”), the Santos government used the military advantages to search for peace with all insurgent groups.⁸ This received support from the international community, including not only Latin American governments, but also many European nations.

This shift was materialized in the “*Política de prosperidad democrática*”⁹ which facilitated the conditions for a political negotiation while taking advantage of the military change in the balance of power¹⁰. The arrival to a peace agreement was the product of a negotiation, a process that had an agenda that revolved around the topics of “political participation, rural reform, illicit drugs and illicit crops, transitional justice, demobilization, disarmament and reintegration, and the implementation of the agreements.” (Nasi, 2018; Oficina Del Alto Comisionado para La Paz, 2018).

The Santos government had the objective of normalizing relations with their left-leaning neighbors. But, it also wished to respond to international concerns with regards to human rights, and aimed for a pragmatic attitude with the rest of the region. At the same time, it aimed for profound cooperation with the U.S. and to “give continuity to the military, economic and political support that the country had received through Plan Colombia, in addition to the continuity, an attempt was made to broaden the bilateral agenda, [...] in order to establish a more lasting and balanced alliance” (Rojas, 2013, p.126).

The change in the doctrine of security within the country did not mean that the peace negotiations with the FARC-EP would be compromised though. Since the beginning of the peace process, the Colombian government had U.S. support, but with some conditions as “[...] the fight against drugs must be maintained” (Rojas, 2013, p. 126). It is important to note that the U.S. was not a negotiating member at Havana, but its role was important within the process. Should the U.S. had vetoed the negotiations, no agreement would have been reached.

Several facts demonstrate U.S. support for this process. First, 62 U.S. Congressional members sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of State, asking for support for the peace process and requesting an economic assistance package for the implementation of post-conflict policies (Haugaard, 2013). Secondly, the U.S. appointed Bernard Aronson as special envoy to the negotiations, who had experience in the peace process in El Salvador.

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Throughout the process, Aronson traveled multiple times to Havana during the dialogues. John Kerry, then Secretary of State, also traveled to Cuba at different time. U.S. participation indeed "had a low profile and from time to time manifested their support in public," but its support was necessary for the attainment of a peace agreement (La Franchi, 2016). All this took place, while the FARC-EP remained part of the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

Despite the support for peace, the issue of drugs remained a U.S. priority. It is no surprise then that this agreement involved the implementation of a plan to counter illicit crops (PNIS¹¹), and the agreements still aimed to reduce the number of coca crops during 2018 in more than 40 municipalities through a gradual approach where "[...] there are various eradication strategies in which the first option is voluntary, followed by manual eradication forced and as a last resort, aerial spraying" (Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el delito (UNODC), 2018).

In a way, it was expected that the achievement of a peace agreement "[would] lead to an advance in the war on drugs, [however, there has been] an increase in crops since 2013 in several regions of the country" (Rojas, 2017, p. 43). As of December 2017, the area with coca crops in Colombia has "increased by 17%, reaching 171,000 [...] hectares" (Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el delito (UNODC), 2018).

This increase in illicit crops is partially explained by the decision during the second Santos government (2014-2018) to reduce the aerial spraying of illicit crops. The administration made this choice due to the decision by the *Consejo Nacional de Estupefacientes* that pointed out the public health risk of using chemicals.

The increase on illicit crops became one of the main arguments wielded by the *CD* party,¹² led by former President Uribe, to claim the failure of the peace agreements. In December 2016, Uribe, leader of the opposition to the peace agreement, traveled to Washington to meet with Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken; legislators from both parties; people close to Trump, such as Rudy Giuliani; and with some Congressmen, all with the objective of seeking support from the U.S. government to reject the peace agreements.

The opposition from the *CD* to the peace agreement did not operate in a vacuum as the FARC-EP was a highly unpopular organization. Indeed, broad sectors of the population rejected the peace agreements, not only because of the agreements themselves, but because they also disliked the FARC-EP and also rejected the Santos government, peace was less popular than their hatred for the FARC-EP, or the lack of popularity of Santos.

The arrival of Trump was preceded by a conservative backlash following the peace agreement signed during the Santos administration. In the context of political polarization between opponents and supporters of the agreement, new elections were held in 2018, which gave the *CD* a high number of representatives and supported the election of Ivan Duque into the presidency of Colombia (Diaz & Jiménez, 2018).

President Duque is a former freshman in the Colombian congress (2014-2018) who gained salience with his opposition to the peace agreements. His political career before entering

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congress was marked by being a political appointee of different governments at the Inter-American Development Bank and the Colombian Ministry of Finance. With his entrance to the senate with the CD party, his policies have been more aligned with Colombian right wing parties. Whereas his political statements depicts him as a centre figure, even quoting Nelson Mandela at the UN, most of his support and political decisions respond to the demands from the Colombian hard-right, having announced his opposition to the transitional justice framework, and filibustering with the CD the institutions that have the mission of implementing the peace accords with the FARC-EP.

Recent decisions such as blocking the provisions for the implementation of a special jurisdiction for peace for the victims of the Colombian conflict position him as someone that is not respectful of the division of powers enshrined in the Colombian constitution, and as a President that is not willing to comply with the agreements signed by the Colombian state (The Economist, 2019). In this instance, his counter-institutional positions resemble Trump government policies. Several government officials have been fired during his government for not aligning with his government policies that include the denial of the peace agreements, the rejection of the rights for the LGBTQI community, and the rights of minorities (afro-descendants and indigenous groups).

Whereas the presidential elections were informed by a Conservative agenda, it is important to note that the second most popular candidate was a representative of a broad coalition of left and center parties. Nonetheless, the election of Duque generated a realignment between the conservative views of the U.S. and the conservative views of some important sectors in Colombia assuming a subordinate stance towards the U.S.

In addition, the humanitarian crisis taking place due to the economic collapse of Venezuela and the rise of right wing parties in Latin America have brought a restoration of more conservative views regarding politics and the state (López, 2016). Whereas not all Latin American countries are embracing conservative politics, several countries are swaying right, an interesting change in a region that saw a rise in left-wing politics over the last few decades.

Before taking office, Duque visited the U.S. to meet with politicians aligned with the Republican Party and the Trump administration, and to reveal the interest by Colombian political elites in maintaining and strengthening the U.S.–Colombia relationship and how the commonality of interests are chosen and deployed in order to facilitate cooperation between both countries. This has been referred as an relationship in which “intervention happens by invitation” of the Colombian Government (Tickner, 2017).

Whereas the issue of drug production and illicit crop growth has been central to the relation between Colombia and the U.S. for decades, the Duque government has taken advantage of this alignment to bring "attention to the intensity and strategic interest of the bilateral relationship, crossed, unfortunately but undeniably, by the criminal presence of drug trafficking" (El Colombiano, 2018).

Thus, despite that Trump is seen as a disruptive force due to his lack of a clear institutional approach towards foreign policy, the Colombian government under Duque is assuming a

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pragmatic strategizing in which the Colombian government moves in whichever direction the (current) U.S. government has decided to focus disregarding local policies and agreements such as the ones stated in the peace agreements with the FARC-EP.

The bilateral agenda under Trump involves intense cooperation and stability on important issues, but given the centrality of drug trafficking and drug production, this does not really present a break with the past. The break is not taking place in the issues, it takes place in the policies, the rhetoric and communication taking place.

3. The end of institutional International Relations? The arrival of Donald Trump

Many have argued that the arrival of Trump has catalyzed a seismic shift in U.S. policy. Some have argued that negotiations with North Korea and rapprochement with Russia in the middle of the meddling scandal demonstrate this (Masters, 2018).

The analysis of this claim should distinguish between the discursive style and the actual policies, differentiating between specific cases and the general trend of foreign affairs within the U.S. Whereas the style of Trump is definitely less institutional, and can be seen as subversive and even patrimonial, we should draw out clear distinctions in order to understand these dynamics. So far, Trump's arrival has changed some state policies with regards to some particular countries, but his administration has not changed the U.S. approaches to all countries where the U.S. has diplomatic presence. Thus, when we talk about difference between governments we might be focusing on the policy changes, rather than on the policies that are not changing.

Another option is to consider whether we distinguish between the parties in power -- Republican and Democratic governments – and their policies, and whether the changes in the presidency actually bring about a continuation or a re-emergence of previous policies undertaken by the previous government. If this is the case, we could potentially observe continuity in state policies, but a divergence between government policies. Trump thus could be seen as governmental divergence, but offering nothing more than state continuity in terms of actual policies.

There are surely some changes taking place in reaction to the growing presence of China and Russia in several Latin American countries, and the response by the U.S. government has been a return to old policies. Nothing new is being attempted here; old policies are proposed again to similar challenges. Thus, the return to a more interventionist/confrontational approach is nothing different from what was observed in, for example Grenada, Panama, and El Salvador during the 1980s. The return to the Monroe Doctrine in foreign policy, which Trump's former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explicitly endorsed, is quite simply a rehash of old ideas, thinking they will be good enough to face new challenges within a more complex setting.

In the case of Colombia, Chinese investment has been less visible in comparison with other Latin American countries. Yet, this does not mean Chinese investment is totally absent. In Colombia, in recent years, the Chinese government, through the Chinese Development Bank, in cooperation with the National Development Bank (FDN), has signed infrastructure investment agreements throughout the country (Revista Portafolio, 2018).

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China has attempted a more soft-powered approach with scholarships and business rounds “as commissions mixed cooperation in economy [,] trade, [science] and [scholarships]” (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2010, p.12-13) to attract support within Colombia. However, these investments have not reflected any potential policy shift in Colombia towards the U.S. Should the Chinese market become a potential source of investment expansion for Colombian exporters and industrials, we could observe a shift in relations. For now, Colombia aims to benefit from strong relations with both China and the U.S. without irritating either global power.

The arrival of Trump brought a series of uncertainties to Colombia, as well as to the rest of the world. The rise of Trump brought questions to both the Santos government and the incumbent Duque government (Pardo, 2017; León, 2017). The challenge for the Colombian government has been to make sense of the different declarations of the then-candidate, and now president, and how they would affect Colombia.

The question was not about what to do with the president of the U.S., but rather how to make sense of his international relations agenda, given incoherent statements. As most of Trump’s rhetoric on the campaign remained focused on domestic issues, the few remarks that related to foreign affairs and Colombia were vague and unclear.

Though Trump was clearly pursuing a right-wing populist approach, this was not in itself anything new. George W. Bush also brought a flavor of this in previous years. Colombia, however, is no revolutionary country, and it does not explicitly oppose Trumpian political or ideological hegemony in Latin America. In many ways, Colombia aligns with the U.S. ethos as a conservative country, and the policies and the discourses of Trump resonated with a segment of the Colombian population. For example, talking “tough” on drug trafficking, emphasizing military cooperation, and confronting the crisis in Venezuela are all positions that the Colombian polity is familiar with. The reality is that the arrival of Trump presents a more dramatic shift for non-aligned countries with the U.S., as Colombia has been mostly aligned with the U.S. throughout its history (Tickner, 2017).

A hard position on drugs is something that has persisted in the U.S. since the Nixon era. And Colombia, for its part, has been spraying and undertaking a forced eradication approach to illicit crops, and has continued the policies of interdiction of illicit drugs in spite of their proven failure since this time in spite of the evidence that this is a policy bound to continue failing (Mejia, 2017). . As the logic of force resonates with many Republican politicians, the biggest shift in this area to consider is how eradication will take place, especially due to the increase in consumption of hard drugs across the U.S. According to data from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) fatalities increased to 72,000/year in 2017 and “consumption increased by about 10% over the previous year ... the more than 72,000 drug overdose deaths estimated in 2017, the sharpest increase occurred among deaths related to [...] (synthetic opioids) with nearly 30,000 overdose deaths” (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018).

Some might certainly link the increase in consumption with the increase in production, such as in Colombia. However, this ignores the fact that drug production fills a preexisting demand for them. Amid these dynamics, the new Colombian government has looked to align with the new Pre-print version (July 2019). Forthcoming (2019) in “The Future of U.S. Empire in the Americas: The Trump Administration and Beyond.” Routledge. Edited by Tim Gill.

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U.S. policy. In doing so, the new Colombian governments has decided to prohibit the personal use of drugs, a decision that is seen as “more than a legal act, a political act [...] Duque is looking for applause, but these measures are inefficient to combat the large drug trafficking groups and to reduce the damages associated with them” (Espinosa, 2018).

Coca production is confronted through the direct eradication of coca crops, and also through the fight against drug cartels. Yet, it is rarely seen that the policies aim to curb the flow of money from trafficking. It is no coincidence that Colombia is one of the fastest growing crypto-currency markets “with a growth of 370%” (Crypto Curry, 2018). Money laundering is central to trafficking, but it is not yet seen as strategically important for either the U.S. or Colombia in the design of their policies against drugs. And so, in the end, cooperation with regards to security and drugs has not witnessed substantial changes under Trump.

A key element in foreign relations between the U.S. and Colombia also involves the use of Colombia as a foreign training ground for soldiers from other countries. Within Colombia, the U.S. has financed training initiatives for members of the armed forces from countries like Afghanistan, Guatemala, Honduras, México, and Indonesia (Marino, 2015). This cooperation is important for three reasons: (1) training forces from these countries is more contentious in the U.S. due to the human rights records of these countries; (2) the costs of training are lower in Colombia; and (3) the training grounds and nature of the clashes are closer to the landscapes, experiences, and the tactics of Colombia, as opposed to the U.S.

Overall, the connection between military cooperation and counter-narcotics policies are summarized by declarations from the Trump government: “support and cooperation of the Colombian government from the military field, to compl[y] with the law and the development is extraordinary and is something that we try to replicate with other countries, (...) so the United States is ready to support [the Colombian government] in its efforts, [while] simultaneously I am working diligently to fight [drug] consumption internally” (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2017). Thus, whereas there is an overall decline in U.S. financial support for Colombia (from \$474 million in 2017 to \$33 million in 2018), this amount remains significant, making Colombia the biggest aid recipient in the Western Hemisphere (USAID, 2018).

Finally, the crisis in Venezuela also bears on relations between the two. The challenge presented by the authoritarian regime of Maduro is not entirely new for Colombia, as tensions between Colombia and Venezuela have existed since late Chávez came to power in 1999. The tensions along the border during the last 20 years have been related to drug trafficking, and the existence of armed groups in Colombia.

What the election of Maduro in 2013 signified for Colombia was the intensification of an internal problem in Venezuela. But, the economic, social, and political breakdown in Venezuela has now become a transnational challenge, with the exodus of Venezuelans into the country. The Venezuelan situation has now generated a refugee crisis throughout the continent that includes more than one million reported refugees entering into Colombia in the last few years, and counting (Galindo, 2018).

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Venezuela and issues involving drugs are also not separate. Drug trafficking has increased in Venezuela, and there are alleged alliances between drug cartels and sectors of the Venezuelan armed forces. As Venezuela remains one of the main routes of traffickers to exports drugs to Europe (Mejia, 2016). Within Venezuela, “a key moment in the strengthening of drug trafficking occurred with the expulsion from the DEA in 2005 ... combined with the suspension of the agreement of over flight to monitor narco-flights” (InSight Crime, 2018, p.20). As a result, Venezuelan government policies have seemingly exacerbated existing drug trafficking problems in the region.

4. The future of the agenda: Drugs, peace and Venezuela

The most important issue between the U.S. and Colombia involves drug trafficking. The forced eradication of illicit crops and the increase in drug consumption in the U.S. largely monopolizes the bilateral agenda. And this has the potential to severely affect the implementation process of the FARC-EP/Colombian government agreements. The challenge lies in the fact that illicit crops and the processing of drugs have been intertwined with the Colombian conflict. The places where the drug trade has taken place are usually the places where the state is weak or absent (19% of the Colombian territory) (Mejia, 2016). Embracing a tough discourse on drugs and their production might thus affect the implementation of the peace agreements, give political credence to the remaining armed organizations, and subsidize the finances of spoilers through repression.

The objective of curbing production via eradication or spraying of chemicals is to weaken the chain of production of drugs. However, in practice this has meant the alienation of the citizenry in the areas where coca is grown, the default of the government on its previous promises with regards to illicit crops and the peace process, and has allowed drug cartels to recruit former cadres of the FARC-EP who became discontented by the failure of the state to deliver its promises. The areas where coca is grown lie in the faultiness of the Colombian state, where the peace agreements initiatives were mostly to take place, and where the state still believes the logic of force will work.

A case in point is the city of Tumaco on the Colombian Pacific. In this area of the country, drug trafficking and illicit crops are part of a subsistence economy, where a political economy of drugs is central to the livelihoods of marginalized communities. In this case, for example, “88% of the population is Afro-Colombian, and the representatives of the ... community affirm that we plant [coca] for the support of our families, since licit crops do not give us anything” (Gonzalez, 2017, p. 10).

These situations raise questions about the relationship concerning a military approach to a socio-economic problem, not only due to the likelihood of failure, but given the risks of giving political capital to armed groups and traffickers, weakening the standing of the state with many communities, and forfeiting the opportunity for the state to reassert its presence in these areas. Whereas the monopoly of force is central to statehood, it cannot replace state-building and state institutions. This is why alternative development projects in these territories were a central part of the peace agreements signed between the FARC-EP and the Colombian government.

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The fight against drugs, however, is a function of the demand. Therefore, attempting to curve consumption and its increase in the U.S. is the elephant in the room. This requires considering what the elements that drive consumption are, and how they relate to the socio-economic and cultural realm within the U.S., for which no agenda besides repression is being proposed. In the last few years, there was greater international advocacy for dealing with drug consumption as a public health issue, such as, for example, by the Colombian government together with the Guatemalan and Mexican governments. Repression yet remains.

With the signature of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP, the Colombian military sector has started to analyze regional and international challenges beyond public order, and have begun considering scenarios involving the border tensions with Nicaragua¹³ and Venezuela. On the Venezuelan end, for instance, the Venezuelan government has purchased military hardware from countries like Russia and Belarus. These arms purchases have alarmed the Colombian government, and created fear about the need for such a military build-up. As a response, the Colombian state has closely integrated with U.S. military exercises.

The signature of a military cooperation agreement with NATO by former President Santos on December 23, 2017, as well as the United States-Colombia joint air maneuvers at the Palanquero Air Base in July 2017, are clear examples of the deep military cooperation between the two countries (Lippo, 2017). These actions are expected to serve as deterrents.

Whereas some sectors in the U.S. and in Colombia would prefer a tougher approach towards Venezuela, they must remember that interventions based on the use of force or coercion give political capital and support against whom those measures are imposed. In a similar way, as with drug production and trafficking, both the U.S. and Colombia need to envision alternatives that facilitate democratic change in Venezuela without giving political capital to the Maduro regime. The interventions taking place in the international arena within the OAS and other international organizations are a good alternative to this.

In the end, and in spite of the geo-strategic concerns of both Colombia and the U.S., the power and the projection of power from the U.S. in Colombia will remain. Whether the hard stance on drugs fuels the war and the conflict in Colombia for the next century, or the alignment of Colombia pushes the Colombian government towards an unseen interventionist approach towards its neighbors, at the end it is the soft-power that has influenced Colombian policymakers to decide to use force. The responsibility lies in their hands, and it cannot be attributed to the U.S. government alone. Be it naïveté, or a willingness to support the policies of Trump, Colombia will follow the lead of the hegemon, no matter who is the president in power there.

Notes

¹ According to the report *América Latina y el Caribe y China: hacía una nueva era de cooperación económica* of CEPAL: “China is already the second main origin of the imports of the region, and the third largest destination of its exports. Between 2000 and 2014, its share in Pre-print version (July 2019). Forthcoming (2019) in “The Future of U.S. Empire in the Americas: The Trump Administration and Beyond.” Routledge. Edited by Tim Gill.

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regional exports went from 1% to 9% (in 2013 it reached 10%), while its share in imports it went from little more than 2% to 16%” (CEPAL, 2015).

2. Revolutionary Alternative Forces of Colombia- People’s Army.

3. National Liberation Army.

⁴ National planning department of Colombia.

⁵ It is important to note that studies in recent years highlight a relationship between glyphosate and increased cancer. According to public health reports: "It has been shown that manipulation of glyphosate by the peasant population is insecure. Studies have shown the presence of this herbicide in the body in people who are exposed for work or involuntary reasons, even in children through the bad storage conditions, and this is because this toxic has no absorption only gastrointestinal, but also mucocutaneous and inhaled. Some in vitro experiments have shown cytotoxicity and genotoxicity of exposure to glyphosate, hence the association that is attributed to cancer” (Campuzano Cortina C, Feijoó Fonnegra LM, Manzur Pineda K, Palacio Muñoz M, Rendón Fonnegra J, Zapata Díaz JP, 2017,pp 127).

⁶ Something to note here is the impact of this policy on the gross production of cocaine. In fact, according to some reports, the output of the drug manufacturing process during these years seems to have been less severely hit. This hints at the improvement of the manufacturing process of cocaine, as well as the capacity to increase the yield of the crops. Thus drug traffickers were able to meet the demand with fewer crops. The financial incentives of repression contributed to this. (Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia y UNODC/SIMCI, 2013).

⁷ Families in action/ Youths in Action/ Employment in action

⁸ This, in addition to a series of internal challenges within the FARC-EP made evident the legitimacy gap of the FARC-EP, however for the government it was clear that military actions had a limit in their returns, whereas they had achieved to weaken logistically and strategically the FARC-EP, the FARC-EP was not defeated.

⁹ Democratic Prosperity Policy.

¹⁰ A series of military operations hit the FARC-EP leadership, such as the death of Raul Reyes (FARC- EP’s chancellor) and Ivan Rios (One of the members of the guerrilla secretariat) in 2008 and on 2010 Jorge Briceño (Military head of the FARC-EP), and in 2011 the FARC-EP leader Alfonso Cano

¹¹ National Program for the Replacement of Crops for Illicit Use

¹² Democratic Center Party

¹³ The tensions with Nicaragua refer to the claim of sovereignty of waters in the Caribbean Sea. Recently Nicaraguan Armed forces have acquired new armed vessels to patrol in these areas, which have generated tensions between both countries.

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