

No room for peace?

United States' policy in Colombia

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The United States' support for peace efforts in Colombia has been ambivalent at best, and always subject to the pressures of official policy priorities: first counternarcotics programmes and now the 'war on terror'. Diplomatic efforts in favour of negotiations have been thwarted by internal governmental divisions among governmental branches and deeply held suspicion of the guerrillas' political will. Throughout the negotiations during the administration of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002), the US government remained focused on counter-narcotics objectives to the detriment of the peace process. Initial, limited support for the negotiations quickly eroded following the murder of three US citizens by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in March 1999, and internal political pressure against the process. Civil society lobbying efforts shaped the debate over US policy and its aid package without substantially altering the content. Following the political shifts instituted by the administration of George Bush (2001–) and the attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, the US is even less willing to support peace talks with the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), although officials have offered some support for negotiation efforts with the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Current US assistance and programmes in Colombia have been incorporated into the global 'war on terror', with increased military funding linked directly to counter-insurgency efforts. In this context, significant US support for any future negotiations with the guerrillas is unlikely.

Counternarcotics policies and peace talks

US international counter-narcotics policies are based on zero tolerance at home and abroad, criminalizing all stages in the chain of illegal narcotic production, transport and consumption. By declaring drug trafficking a threat to national security, and making the Pentagon the lead agency for international counter-narcotics policy, President Reagan set the stage for the expansion of the "war on drugs" in the 1990s. These efforts in Colombia have been two-pronged: extensive herbicide spraying in



illicit crop growing areas, primarily coca fields in southern Colombia, and hundreds of millions of dollars in military hardware and training for Colombian security forces involved in counter-narcotics operations. Since 1989, when President George Bush Sr. announced the “Andean Strategy,” counter-narcotics funding has escalated from US\$18 million to almost US\$750 million in 2003.

US counter-narcotics programmes have been an obstacle to peace efforts on several levels. Fumigation has an impact on large-scale coca growers and peasant farmers alike, destroying food crops and alternative development projects as well as coca fields. Fumigation campaigns have exacerbated existing social tensions, eroded public confidence in the government, and generated widespread protests, including the largest peasant mobilization of the decade in massive protest marches in 1996. US military assistance for counter-narcotics operations changes the correlation of forces on the battlefield, by offering training and supplies for the Colombian military. Since 1999, growing US support for the Colombian army has been viewed as endorsement of a military ‘solution’ to the conflict. Finally, the imposition of ‘non-negotiable’ counter-narcotics policies by the US means that the Colombian government has been unable to set their own policy agenda. Despite the fact that counter-narcotics policy was the tenth point on the FARC’s platform, the US made it clear to their Colombian governmental allies that changes in US policy imperatives

were unacceptable. Failure to comply with US objectives could result in decertification in the annual assessment of all countries’ compliance with counter-narcotics objectives, meaning the loss of US aid.

US suspicion of the Colombian guerrillas and hostility within many official sectors to negotiating reforms has also impeded the development of successful negotiations. Lewis Tambs, US Ambassador to Colombia 1983–1985 is credited with inventing the term “narcoguerrillas” to describe the FARC and the ELN. For much of the 1990s, many US officials portrayed the guerrillas in public comments and private meetings simply as drug trafficking bandits. The FARC and the ELN are also both listed on the US State Department List of Terrorist Organizations, as is the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary group.

US policy and Pastrana’s efforts for peace

Many hoped that the 1998 election of President Andrés Pastrana would offer an opportunity to broaden the US–Colombia agenda. President Bill Clinton pledged his support for the peace process and expressed his intent to broaden US–Colombian relations to address a range of issues, including human rights, judicial reform and trade. State Department officials, at the request of the Colombian government, began meetings to support the negotiations. In December 1998, Deputy Assistant

Secretary of State for Andean Affairs Philip Chicola spent two days in Costa Rica with representatives of the FARC. Two months later, US Ambassador Curtis Kamman was among the foreign diplomats to attend the inauguration of peace talks in the demilitarized zone. These efforts came under sharp attack from critical Congressional Republicans who used their power in the appointment process to prevent the confirmation of Assistant Secretary of State Peter Romero, in response to his approval of the meeting with the FARC.

In March 1999, FARC actions further eroded US support for the process. The FARC killed three US indigenous rights activists who were visiting Arauca in support of the Uwa indigenous people in their struggle against Occidental Petroleum oil exploration. Despite the published pleas of one of the victims' mother in favour of peace efforts, US officials prohibited future meetings with the FARC until those responsible were handed over to the Colombian justice system. As the FARC refused, the US declined to participate in any public events for the process or any Group of Friends meetings.

Even in the first hopeful months of the peace process, the US was expanding military assistance programmes to Colombia. As early as December 1998, the US instigated a major policy shift by beginning to support the Colombian military. At a meeting of Latin American defence ministers, Defence Secretary William Cohen and Colombian Defence Minister Rodrigo Lloreda agreed to the first new Colombian Army counter-narcotics battalion. By 1999, Colombia had become the third largest recipient of US military assistance in the world.

The 'emergency' aid package of 'US Support for Plan Colombia' presented by President Clinton totalled US\$1.3 billion for 2000 and 2001 (US\$860 million of which was assistance to Colombia), and barely reflected prevailing efforts for peace. What was described as US support for President Pastrana's national development plan in reality changed it substantially. Pastrana had first presented Plan Colombia in 1998 as a "Marshall Plan" for economic and social development in southern Colombia. But the final Plan Colombia was a vague proposal for reform, rumoured to have been written in English and never debated in the Colombian Congress. The bulk of US\$642 million assistance to the security forces included within the package was designated for the "Push into Southern Colombia" and used to train and equip three new army counter-narcotics battalions and provide helicopters and intelligence assistance. For the FARC, this was one more example of how the Pastrana administration was not genuinely interested in peace.

Domestic debates on US–Colombia policy

Corporate lobbyists have also played a visible role in shaping US assistance to Colombia. *Newsweek* magazine reported that Lockheed Martin, one of the largest defence contractors in the US, commissioned a poll revealing that the drug war was a weak issue for the Democrats in the 2000 election. Helicopter manufacturers have been pushing the aid package as well. Occidental Petroleum Vice President Lawrence Meriage was one of a very few non-governmental witnesses to testify before Congress in favour of the package, as a leader in the US–Colombia Business Partnership, founded in 1996 to represent US companies with business interests in Colombia.

Non-governmental, religious and activist groups also lobbied to change the aid package, advocating the removal or reduction of military assistance, the addition of human rights language and more development aid. Beginning in 1997, a loose coalition called the Colombia Steering Committee coordinated these efforts, posting legislative updates and organizing lobbying efforts. While each organization focused their efforts according to individual institutional mandates, all shared the general objectives of building public support for the peace process and improving the human rights situation. Given the difficulties in the process, NGOs were more successful in raising human rights issues than promoting the peace agenda. NGO lobbyists were successful in working with Congressional staff to add human rights conditions into the legislation. According to these conditions, the State Department must certify that the Colombian government is making progress on a series of specific human rights issues, including prosecuting paramilitary leaders and removing from active duty military officers accused of collusion with such groups. These conditions were either waived or certified following pro forma review. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Washington Office on Latin America responded with a series of joint documents offering evidence that the Colombian government had not met the certification requirements. Despite frustration at the lack of genuine implementation of the conditions, each certification process was an opportunity for debate, and raised the profile of human rights in US policy.

The 'Leahy Law', named for sponsor Senator Patrick Leahy, and one of the most active senators on human rights issues, was also central in debates over human rights issues in Colombia. Attached to appropriations bills from 1997, this law prohibits military assistance to foreign military units implicated in human rights violations, and stipulates that corrective measures must be taken (the language has varied slightly in different bills over time). Interpretation has been subject to debate, particularly

over what constitutes a 'unit' and what appropriate corrective measures are. In Colombia, the US has instituted a vetting programme to view the record of soldiers receiving US training. To date, the US has applied the Law to temporarily suspend funding in three cases.

President George Bush Jr. expanded the strategy of supporting local police and security forces in the war on drugs with the Andean Regional Initiative. Despite the on-going efforts to salvage the negotiations, peace in Colombia was not part of the Bush agenda. With the attacks on the US of 11 September 2001, any residual support for the Colombian peace process almost immediately evaporated as US attention became focused on the Middle East. By the time the process collapsed in February 2002, US officials were openly pleased.

'War on terror'

Following the '9/11' attacks, US foreign policy, including policy towards Colombia, underwent a major shift as the US focused on terrorism. Paradoxically, military aid to Colombia has continued increasing even as Colombia has become less of a policy priority, given expanding US military engagement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries. Since the '9/11' attacks, US officials including Secretary of State Colin Powell and former US Ambassador to Colombia Anne Patterson have linked the FARC and al-Qaeda in public statements and incorporated Colombia into the broader 'war on terror'.

Starting in 2002, the US further expanded their military operations in Colombia with the Pipeline protection programme, entailing US\$99 million to protect the Canon-Limon from attack by the ELN and the FARC in 2002–03. Another US\$147 million will go to Colombia through the same funding programme in 2004, but only part of this will go to the pipeline effort. More than 70 US Special Forces officers will train two elite battalions of Colombian soldiers to protect the pipeline, 50 per cent of which is owned by US-based Occidental Petroleum.

The next major change occurred in August 2002. A change in US law allowed lethal assistance provided to Colombia – previously restricted to counter-narcotics operations – to be used in "counterterrorism" operations. Now, US aid and training can be used by Colombian army units to attack FARC, ELN and AUC fronts in a move that directly incorporates Colombia into the US 'war on terror'. On 10 September 2003, General James Hill, head of US Southern Command, linked Middle Eastern and Latin American terrorists, concluding, "Not surprisingly, Islamic radical groups and narco-terrorists in Colombia all practice the same business methods". President Bush included an additional US\$104 million for Colombia in the 'emergency supplemental' foreign aid package

passed in March 2003 to pay for the war in Iraq. The requested 2004 foreign aid package includes US\$731 million in aid for the Andean Counterdrug Initiative destined for Colombia and six other countries.

Paramilitary talks

The Uribe administration has begun a radically different kind of negotiation with the right-wing paramilitary groups. On 10 September 2001, the AUC was added to the State Department list of terrorist organizations, and the US has indicted AUC spokesman Carlos Castaño (as well as FARC leaders) for drug trafficking. Although the internal dynamics of the process remains unclear, US officials have been very supportive in public statements. In an interview published in the major Bogotá daily *El Tiempo*, former US Ambassador to Colombia Anne Patterson said that the US would help fund the demobilization of paramilitary forces.

Impact of US involvement

Since the late 1990s, the US has appeared to be adopting a 'Salvadoran' style strategic approach. Civilian and military policy-makers alike invoke US policy towards El Salvador in the 1980s as the model, in which direct military intervention is eschewed in favor of escalating assistance in the form of equipment, training and intelligence technology. As in El Salvador, US officials also emphasize the need to strengthen the military to force the guerrillas to the table. One senior intelligence official reported that President Bush was even more hostile to the idea of negotiating with the guerrillas than Uribe. The US is offering support for the experimental demobilization process with the paramilitaries. Given the history of the US role in Colombia, and the current directions of US policy, however, active US support for talks with the guerrillas remains extremely unlikely.

In both the 'war on drugs' and the 'war on terror', US policy towards Colombia remains driven by domestic policy considerations rather than a reasoned response to the Colombian conflict. Both these frameworks have generated widespread support among the general population, and grant wide latitude for a militarized response by positioning US authorities as tackling an extensive and amorphous evil. In polarizing debates, extremist rhetoric limits the degree to which reformists can push for a peace-centred agenda. Given the relatively low profile of Colombia in the press and among the public, few progressive politicians are willing to risk the political costs of working for peace in Colombia. This dynamic has particularly dire consequences for Colombian government leaders, dependent on the US for trade and economic assistance and unwilling to challenge US policy dictates once in office.