

US foreign policy towards Latin America's oldest guerrilla group

Sebastián Chaskel
Research Associate, Latin America Studies Program,
Council on Foreign Relations, New York

US foreign policy toward Colombia is at a crossroads. Colombia's security achievements - including the recent release of 15 FARC hostages - and prospects for a negotiated solution, coupled with a revived interest in the region's efforts to solve its own problems in the light of the United States' loss of influence, mean that Washington must update its policies in order to further its interests. The new Democratic Congress and the incoming administration should encourage the Colombian government to be ready to engage the FARC politically and diplomatically; emphasize economic and social development in US assistance to Colombia; and support regional leaders and processes that intend to address the region's underlying security issues.

The United States has long had an interest in stemming the flow of drugs, supporting democracy, neutralizing terrorist groups, and helping bring long-lasting peace to Colombia and stability to the region. Colombia's unique position as a continuous democracy, which is unable to rid its territory of drug traffickers and terrorists, has made it the United States' natural ally since the 1980s. The FARC, as a narco-trafficking terrorist group, has consistently been at the center of this policy.

When Democrats and Republicans alike helped create Plan Colombia in the late 1990s, Congress mandated that U.S. funds be used only for counter-narcotics efforts, not to fight Colombia's civil war. Nonetheless, this distinction soon seemed tenuous as Colombia's guerrilla groups were heavily involved in narco-trafficking. Congress' hesitation evaporated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the past seven years, much of U.S. assistance has been devoted to fighting what a State Department official called "the most dangerous international terrorist group based in this hemisphere."¹

Today, Colombia's success against the FARC has become Washington's pride and joy. Republican Congressman Dan Burton recently wrote that "Colombia has progressed by leaps and bounds over the past eight years".² Representatives Eliot Engel and Gregory Meeks, both Democrats, referred to President Uribe's achievements as "nothing short of miraculous."³ When virtually every government in the Western Hemisphere criticized Colombia's raid into Ecuador last March, President Bush's defense of Colombia's action was echoed by the Clinton, McCain, and Obama campaigns.

¹ Taylor, Timothy X., Department of State Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, "The Western Hemisphere's Response to the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attack on the United States", Hearing before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 10 October 2001, available at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2001/5674.htm>.

² Burton, Dan., Colombia Deserves Renewal of Trade Agreement, *Miami Herald*, 5 March, 2008.

³ "Crisis in the Andes: The Border Dispute Between Colombia and Ecuador, and Implications for the Region", Briefing and Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on Foreign Relations, House of Representatives, 10 April 2008, available at: <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/41757.pdf>.

Colombia's success at establishing rule of law, however, raises important policy questions about how to bring the conflict to an end. Believing that former President Andrés Pastrana's peace process failed because incentives for negotiation were missing, Álvaro Uribe had a plan to bring the FARC into negotiation. "The day that criminals see a government as firm as the constitution and with the support of the majority of the population ready to confront them, that's the day when they will negotiate," Uribe explained to *El Tiempo* in 2001, "but if they continue to see exhausted, weak, anemic governments, they will increase their military might and continue to feed their ambition to take power."⁴ Uribe's hard-line approach was intended to make way for negotiations.

After six years of fighting the FARC, some in Uribe's administration, and possibly Uribe himself, are at best ambivalent about adapting their strategy to one that would lead to negotiation. Last January, former Interior and Justice Minister Carlos Holguín Sardi, referring to the FARC, said that "one cannot negotiate with cheaters or liars."⁵ In May he stated that if the FARC's new leader, Alfonso Cano, wants to negotiate, "we are ready to receive him," but if he is not, the government's decision will be to "persecute, reduce, and exterminate him."⁶ At a time when the FARC's new leader is thought to be struggling to consolidate his leadership position within the organization, Holguín's comment is probably counterproductive. It reveals a belief in an outdated theory of conflict resolution in which negotiation serves only as a means to force the enemy to capitulate. Whether it is out of routine or philosophy, there are forces within Uribe's administration that would rather wager on a final military victory instead of a negotiated solution.

It should be a real concern to US policymakers that an eventual peace process may be sabotaged by those who prefer to bet exclusively on a military strategy. But if US policy toward the Pastrana peace process is any guide, the military-victory perspective is echoed by some in the United States' Department of State and Department of Defense.⁷ These individuals either believe in negotiation only as a route to the FARC's surrender, or believe the guerrilla is so deeply entrenched in narco-trafficking that it has become a criminal network, not disposed to negotiations.

Their influence may help explain why the United States has often encouraged a humanitarian accord, but has rarely mentioned a potential peace negotiation. Following the release of Ingrid Betancourt and the three American hostages, the US administration may feel more comfortable pressing for its preferred solution. The nature of the administration's future statements may clarify how influential those that believe in a solely military solution will be in guiding US foreign policy.

Regardless, US policy should not support an attempt at a military solution to Colombia's conflict. A recent *New York Times* editorial rightly pointed out that if Colombia were to attempt a military victory, it would risk further bloodshed and the likely killing of the FARC's hostages.⁸ Furthermore, this strategy would prevent a peace negotiation from addressing some of the root causes of the conflict. "Only the development of democracy will address the grievances that feed the conflict and bring peace," writes Aldo Civico, director of the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University. "A negotiation with the guerrillas is a decisive step toward this achievement."⁹ While some factions of the FARC have most likely been corrupted by the narcotics trade and would not negotiate or demobilize, this itself is a virtue of a successful negotiation: it would separate the FARC's ideological fighters from drug traffickers.

⁴"Creo en el Diálogo", *El Tiempo*, 2 March 2001, see: <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-600634>.

⁵"Prevalece desconfianza en Colombia para negociar con FARC", *El Universal*, 7 January 2008, see: <http://www.el-universal.com.mx/notas/472496.html>.

⁶"Diálogo o muerte: Uribe a las FARC", *El Universal*, 28 May 2008, see: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/internacional/57874.html>

⁷ For a detailed discussion of U.S. foreign policy toward the Pastrana peace negotiations, see J. Arnson, Cynthia, "The Peace Process sin Colombia and U.S. Policy", in: Christopher Welna and Gustavo Gallón (ed.) *Peace, Democracy, and Human Rights in Colombia*, University of Norte Dame Press, 2007.

⁸"Editorial: Colombia's Challenge," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2008, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/31/opinion/31sat2.html>.

⁹ Civico, Aldo, "Finding Peace in Colombia," Letter to the Editor, June 9, 2008, *The New York Times*, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/09/opinion/09colombia.html>.

Once this is achieved, those with political grievances can be helped to integrate into society and participate politically, if they so choose, while narcotics traffickers can be addressed with enforcement of the law. As Colombia's major ally, the United States should use its leverage with the Colombian government to press Uribe to fulfill his initial plan to end the conflict through a negotiated solution. By doing so, the United States would be supporting an end to the FARC that minimizes bloodshed and addresses the root causes of Colombia's conflict.

At the center of US foreign policy toward Colombia is the United States' significant military, economic, and social assistance to Colombia, which is equally in need of change. Through what was initially called Plan Colombia and later on the Andean Counterdrug Initiative, the United States has funded Colombia since 2000 with almost \$6 billion to strengthen rule of law, stem the drug trade, and fight terrorist groups, making Colombia a major recipient of US military aid, and the leading beneficiary of this aid in Latin America. With this assistance, Colombia's security reality has improved so much that the government launched a new Strategy for Strengthening Democracy and Social Development in 2007, emphasizing social investment. This strategy, which became known as Plan Colombia 2, called for the United States to assist Colombia in bringing the state's democratic institutions to the entire country with a package that consisted of 14% military assistance and 86% economic and social funding.

But U.S. policymakers have been reluctant to reformulate U.S. assistance to Colombia. President Bush's 2008 request for funding for Colombia was virtually identical to that of 2007, despite Uribe's petition. It allocated 76% of the funds for military/policing (compared to 77 in 2007) and only 24% for social/economic development (compared to 22% in 2007). Congress reformulated this balance to 65/35 and, after threatening to veto the bill, Bush eventually signed it into law in December 2007. Democratic candidate Barack Obama recently mentioned that as president he would "continue the Andean Counter-Drug Program, and update it to meet evolving challenges."¹⁰ Republican candidate John McCain has made it clear he would continue to support Colombia. Referring specifically to the United States' counter-narcotics strategy, he said in Colombia, "The strategy is working."¹¹ Colombia will continue to receive funding from the United States in the years to come. The pending issue is how much of the United States' support will be military, and how much will reflect Colombia's growing desire for social and economic, not just military, development.

Congress took a step in the right direction by shifting the balance in aid to Colombia, but much more is needed to truly match the United States' interests. US officials need to engage in a productive dialogue with Colombia's leaders to find out how the United States' assistance can best fit into Colombia's new development framework. Policymakers need to realize that the best way the United States can meet its own and Colombia's interests is by supporting Colombia's government in its effort to build on the successes of US aid to Colombia thus far and address the root issues of its conflict through social and economic development.

That said, US-Colombia relations cannot be analyzed in a vacuum. US policy also needs to adapt to the region's growing interest in resolving its own problems. Following Colombia's raid into Ecuadorian territory last March, it was the Rio Group Summit that led to a unanimous declaration, hand shakes, and hugs. When Secretary of State Rice visited the region following the incident, Brazilian President Lula da Silva told her that "South American diplomatic crises should be solved in the region" and explained that Brazil plans to create a South American Defense Council.¹² Two months later, South American presidents signed the treaty of the Union of South American Nations, UNASUR. For better or for worse, the United States' leadership in the region is no longer as welcome nor as useful as it may have been in the past.

¹⁰ Obama, Barack., "Renewing U.S. Leadership in the Americas", Miami, 23 May 2008, available at: http://www.barackobama.com/2008/05/23/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_68.php.

¹¹ "In Colombia, McCain backs free trade", *The Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 2008, available at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-mccain2-2008jul02,0,411645.story?track=rss>.

¹² "Brasil: El nuevo poder", *Cambio*, 18 March 2008, available at: http://www.cambio.com.co/mundocambio/768/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR_CAMBIO-4018282.html.

US policymakers have perceived these changes and acknowledged their government's limited capacity to take a more active role in the region. This can be seen in the United States' unofficial policy to ignore the inflammatory rhetoric of the region's anti-American leaders. Even when the Colombian government released information linking Venezuelan President Chávez to the FARC, the administration's reaction was surprisingly passive. In fact, Obama's statement that support for the FARC "must be exposed to international condemnation, regional isolation, and-if need be-strong sanctions" was much stronger than that of the current administration.

Although some Republican Representatives, such as Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Connie Mack, have recently introduced a congressional resolution calling for Venezuela to be added to the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism, most policymakers seem to agree that it is in the United States' best interests to take a less prominent role in the region. A recent report by Senator Dodd's staff member for Latin America argued that "US actions are stronger if they rest on the foundation of regional support. Absent such support, US sanctions on Venezuela would be less effective. Indeed, they might be counter-productive." The report argues that, if Chávez is found complicit, the region will act in the United States' interest by isolating Chávez, and therefore urges policymakers to "allow for the regional dynamic to take its course."¹³

There is no guarantee that taking a backseat and allowing the region to address its own problems will produce results that fulfill US objectives. But it has become clear that the United States has lost its ability to act in its own interest. As the Colombian conflict develops a growing international dynamic, it will be all the more important for Latin Americans to craft a regional response and for the process not to be jeopardized by the United States' over-involvement. At the same time, US policymakers must begin to have conversations with their Colombian counterparts in order to find the best way for the United States to invest in Colombia's future. In doing this, the United States should encourage and support Colombia in finding a negotiated solution to its protracted conflict. By reformulating its policies in this way, the United States can best meet its interests and those of the region.

¹³ "Playing with Fire: Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela", Report to the Members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, Second Session, 28 April 2008, available at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/index.html>.

FRIDE's Comments provide a brief and concise analysis of current topics in international affairs in the fields of peace and security, democratisation, human rights, and humanitarian action and development. Further information about FRIDE, as well as its publications can be found at www.fride.org

The views expressed by the authors of the documents published on this website do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE.
If you have any comments on the articles or any other suggestions, please email us at comments@fride.org

Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org