



# The United States and Colombia

## From Security Partners to Global Partners in Peace

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February 2, 2016

As Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos visits the United States this week, Colombia stands on the brink of a historic peace agreement that, if successfully reached and implemented, will bring an end to the longest-running internal armed conflict in the Western hemisphere. This reality is a far cry from where the country stood just 15 years ago, when it was on the edge of total state collapse. Although Colombia's ability to overcome what many believed was a hopeless situation rests squarely upon the sacrifice of blood and treasure made by the Colombian people and its public forces, this promising new chapter in Colombia's history also stems in part from the most successful, bipartisan U.S. foreign policy effort undertaken to date in the 21st century—Plan Colombia.

As the United States encounters growing instability in other regions of the world, it is instructive to look back at the U.S. role in fostering the most successful counterinsurgency effort in recent history to understand what worked and what remains unfinished. President Santos' visit also provides an important opportunity to look forward to how the United States and Colombia can solidify Colombia's remarkable gains while becoming true strategic partners.

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### On the edge of collapse

Despite the toppling of the notorious Medellín and Cali drug cartels in the early 1990s,<sup>1</sup> Colombia's security situation began to worsen as the decade came to a close as drug trafficking, organized crime, and internal armed conflict expanded to produce critically high levels of instability. In 1998, for example, Colombia registered some 58 homicides per 100,000 residents, as well as nearly 2,400 kidnappings,<sup>2</sup> making it the global leader in both categories.

By 1999, a failed peace effort had left Colombia's most powerful guerrilla group—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, better known as FARC—in control of territory roughly the size of Switzerland, with 20,000 fighters under arms, an annual income of \$400 million from the illegal drug trade, and another \$500 million from its other illicit activities.<sup>3</sup> As noted by Juan Carlos Pinzón, Colombia's former national defense minister and its current ambassador to the

United States, “In the latter half of the 1990s, the guerrillas were capable of conducting multi-battalion size conventional set piece battles, and controlled large swaths of coca crop growing areas and drug routes, where they forced the displacement of entire towns.”<sup>4</sup> In short, the FARC had become a de facto government in broad swaths of Colombia<sup>5</sup> and represented an existential threat to the Colombian state.<sup>6</sup>

Paramilitaries further exacerbated the security situation in Colombia. In 2000, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia—Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC—the country’s largest paramilitary network, was estimated at nearly 30,000 combatants.<sup>7</sup> The AUC’s operations were funded largely through drug trafficking proceeds—nearly 70 percent—and private-sector financing, and it was deemed responsible for the murder, rape, kidnapping, extortion, and displacement of tens of thousands of Colombians.<sup>8</sup> The other large guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army—Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN—was also in the mix at the turn of the 21st century. In 2000, the ELN had nearly 5,000 fighters in its ranks and routinely engaged in assassinations, kidnappings, bombings, and hijackings against its targets. Between 2000 and 2007, the ELN was responsible for the death of 153 hostages and more than 3,000 kidnappings.<sup>9</sup>

All told, the government of Colombia lacked control over many departments—the functional equivalent of states—in the country and lacked any presence in 169 of the country’s 1,099 municipalities in 2002.<sup>10</sup> This lack of control and the internal armed conflicts feeding it also resulted in Colombia becoming home to the world’s largest internally displaced population—4.7 million people by 2012<sup>11</sup>—a distinction it has only recently ceded to Syria.<sup>12</sup>

As insecurity grew, Colombians also faced an economic recession in the late 1990s. In 1999, Colombia had a fiscal deficit of 5.2 percent, and the nation’s economy contracted by 4.5 percent.<sup>13</sup> Recession led to a sharp rise in inequality, unemployment grew by 100 percent, and more than half of the population lived below the national poverty line, with 23 percent living in extreme poverty.<sup>14</sup>

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## Expanding the U.S.-Colombia partnership: Plan Colombia

As the situation in Colombia deteriorated in the late 1990s, U.S. foreign policy experts talked about Colombia being on the verge of state failure, representing a major threat to regional security and to U.S. interests.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, in what would constitute a key ingredient in Colombia’s return from the brink—as Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, has noted—“by 1999, Colombians had reached a collective conclusion that, if the deteriorating conditions remained unchecked, the viability of the nation was in question. In October of that year, more than 1 million Colombians marched against the FARC in a ‘No más’ nationwide protest.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1999, Colombia's then-President Andrés Pastrana, who served from 1998 to 2002, requested assistance from the United States to help Colombia combat its security crisis. This assistance effort would eventually become Plan Colombia.

In 2000, an original \$1.3 billion in U.S. assistance was approved by a Republican-led U.S. Congress and signed into law by former President Bill Clinton with the goal to reduce coca cultivation, drug production, and drug trafficking by 50 percent in the first six years.<sup>17</sup> Plan Colombia's objectives shifted over time with the reorientation of U.S. national security policy after September 11, 2001, and with Colombia's election of President Álvaro Uribe, who served from 2002 to 2010. President George W. Bush requested and received from Congress authorization to assist the Colombian government's efforts against the FARC, ELN and AUC—all deemed Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the United States.<sup>18</sup> Assistance provided to Colombia also expanded—from \$276.2 million in fiscal year 2001 to \$560.4 million in FY 2002. It increased again in FY 2003 to \$808.1 million before holding steady between approximately \$600 million and \$700 million per year through FY 2010.<sup>19</sup> The elections of U.S. President Barack Obama and Colombian President Santos ushered in another rebalancing of U.S. cooperation to reflect changing realities in Colombia, with a greater percentage of U.S. assistance being dedicated to economic development and the strengthening of Colombian rule of law institutions.<sup>20</sup>

By 2015, the United States had invested \$10 billion in improving security and stability in Colombia.<sup>21</sup> Underscoring the excellent return on investment of Plan Colombia, during roughly the same time period, the United States spent \$1.6 trillion on combat and reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan from FY 2001 to FY 2014, or a rough average of \$10 billion every 29 days.<sup>22</sup> Again crucial to Colombia's turnaround, Colombian investment in its security far outpaced U.S. investment. Even leaving aside the fact that the hard work of enhancing Colombia's security has been carried out by Colombians at tremendous personal sacrifice, Colombia's financial contribution to Plan Colombia constitutes 95 percent of the total.<sup>23</sup> That level of Colombian commitment was made possible, in part, by a recognition by the country's economic elites that investing in the Colombian state and the viability of their nation through paying more in taxes was in their long-term interests.<sup>24</sup>

The investments made by Colombia and the United States have facilitated profound positive change in Colombia's political, social, economic, and security environments.

### Reversing Colombia's security deficit

Much of the U.S. funding has been used to increase state capacity, particularly the capacity of Colombia's security institutions. Colombia's military has experienced tremendous improvements over time, in large part due to the financial support from Washington, which has enabled the United States to help train and better equip Colombian forces.

From 2000 to 2008, for example, Colombia's Army Aviation Brigade received \$844 million from the U.S. government, allowing it to nearly triple its aircraft fleet to more than 100 helicopters.<sup>25</sup> From 2000 to 2008, the Colombian military increased the number of ground forces as a result of \$104 million allocated by Washington.<sup>26</sup> U.S. resources also have been used to advise and train the Colombian military,<sup>27</sup> with the number of professional soldiers in Colombia expanding to 83,000 in 2014 from 20,000 troops in 1998.<sup>28</sup> Critically, congressionally mandated human rights conditions on U.S. funding helped foster far greater professionalism and accountability in Colombia's security ranks than it had ever possessed before.

Increased security force professionalism and mobility have enabled the Colombian government to expand its reach, particularly in departments that were previously dominated by guerrillas and paramilitary forces.<sup>29</sup> By 2007, for example, all 1,099 municipalities in Colombia had a state presence.<sup>30</sup> With increased state presence has come a decline in overall insecurity. By 2014, Colombia's homicide rate had steadily dropped to 26.6 homicides per 100,000 people, the lowest level in nearly three decades.<sup>31</sup> In 2014, Colombia also witnessed only 288 kidnappings<sup>32</sup>—compared with the nearly 3,000 in 2000.<sup>33</sup>

Increased security capacity also strengthened the government's hand vis-à-vis the FARC. In 2002, the FARC had approximately 16,000 combatants.<sup>34</sup> By 2007, 4,600 FARC fighters were either killed or captured.<sup>35</sup> By 2010, the FARC had 8,000 fighters, a number that has held steady through 2015.<sup>36</sup> From 2008 to 2010, through targeted strikes, the Colombian government also successfully killed top FARC leaders for the first time in the conflict's history.<sup>37</sup>

## Economic and social gains

Colombia has made tremendous economic strides during the past 15 years as its security situation has improved. By 2014, Colombia's gross domestic product, or GDP, had grown to \$377.7 billion, compared to \$99.88 billion in 2000,<sup>38</sup> making Colombia the third-largest economy in Latin America.<sup>39</sup> Colombia also has seen major reductions in poverty, with the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line, for example, decreasing from 64 percent in 1999 to 28.5 percent in 2014.<sup>40</sup> Extreme poverty has dropped even more precipitously from 23 percent in 2000 to 8.1 percent in 2014.<sup>41</sup> Colombia's Gini coefficient, the leading indicator of economic inequality, although still high, has narrowed from 58.7 to 53.3 in the past 15 years, an improvement comparable to Brazil's during that country's much touted efforts to move millions of people out of poverty and into the middle class.<sup>42</sup>

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## Colombia's peace process

In 2010, against the backdrop of enhanced security, increased economic growth and stability, and the effective targeting of senior FARC leadership, President Santos launched discussions with the FARC with the aim to end the more than 50-year conflict that has been so devastating for Colombia. This is the fourth time the Colombian government has attempted to negotiate with the FARC.<sup>43</sup> Unlike in previous failed talks, the Colombian government forced the FARC to engage in talks outside Colombia—in Havana, Cuba—and has continued to exert military pressure on the FARC by refusing the FARC's traditional demand of a bilateral ceasefire during peace talks.<sup>44</sup> Today, Colombia stands closer than ever to ending its decades-long conflict.

As of January 2016, the talks, which became both public and formal in August 2012, have yielded agreement on four of the six established agenda items—FARC political participation contingent on the peace agreement being achieved; land reform; promised cooperation to end illegal narcotics trade; and the creation of a transitional justice system to address crimes committed by the FARC during the course of the conflict.<sup>45</sup> Negotiations are expected to conclude by March 23, 2016, with the results being put to the Colombian people for approval or disapproval by national referendum later in the year.<sup>46</sup>

Public support for the peace process has ebbed and flowed during the course of the past five years.<sup>47</sup> Colombians have both a strong desire for peace and a deep skepticism with regard to the FARC abiding by its commitments.<sup>48</sup> In light of those dynamics, the politics around an eventual referendum will be complex and difficult to predict.

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## Challenges remain

Although reaching a peace deal would mark a critical juncture in Colombian history, major challenges exist—with or without such an agreement—to solidify Colombia's recent gains. Security challenges will not end with a deal with the FARC; demobilization challenges will be abundant; inequality, with vast divisions between rural and urban sectors, persists; Colombia still has one of the world's largest internally displaced populations; and it is saddled with weaknesses in key governmental institutions. Underscoring these challenges is the cost of implementing a peace agreement—an estimated \$44 billion over the next 10 years.<sup>49</sup>

## Evolving sources of insecurity

Despite successes in combating principal nonstate actors such as the FARC, Colombia has witnessed the emergence of criminal bands—referred to as *Bandas Criminales*, or BACRIM—which are “syndicates linked to former paramilitary groups.”<sup>50</sup> The BACRIM participate in many illicit activities and were responsible for an estimated 30 percent of human rights abuses in Colombia in 2013.<sup>51</sup> These criminal bands are a security challenge

and “represent a new generation of drug traffickers in Colombia,” according to a recent study looking at the drug trade in the Americas.<sup>52</sup> Gen. Óscar Naranjo, a former head of Colombia’s National Police, has argued that the BACRIM constitute the “principle threat” facing Colombia.<sup>53</sup> The evolution of formerly demobilized and never demobilized paramilitaries into the BACRIM highlights the inherent challenge in demobilizing FARC fighters who have never known a way of life not based on force and illicit activity.

Colombia’s evolving security environment also presents a challenge to Colombia’s security institutions that have been built to fight a counterinsurgency and must now evolve into a different kind of force with different roles and missions. For example, as Colombia’s only police force, the National Police—an arm of the National Defense Ministry—is undersized for the urban policing tasks it now faces and is insufficiently mobile to address the rural policing challenges it soon will have to confront more directly.

### Counternarcotics efforts

While Colombia has made major progress in the security domain, counternarcotics gains have been more limited. Colombia has a long history of coca cultivation, and a major focus of Plan Colombia was to target that cultivation, primarily through aerial spraying of herbicides.<sup>54</sup> Colombia cultivated 160,119 hectares of coca in 1999 and 163,289 hectares in 2000.<sup>55</sup> Coca cultivation decreased over time, with some fluctuations, reaching a low point of 48,189 hectares in December 2013.<sup>56</sup> Cultivation, however, shifted to other Andean countries, as Bolivia and Peru saw increased cultivation when Colombia’s levels dropped.<sup>57</sup> Most recently, Colombia has reclaimed its position as the world’s largest coca cultivating country, with 69,132 hectares in 2014, the last year for which data are available.<sup>58</sup> As part of its discussions with the FARC, in October 2015, the Colombian government ended its aerial eradication efforts, which also had long been assailed for their negative environmental and human impact.<sup>59</sup> In the absence of aerial eradication, coca cultivation is expected to continue increasing.<sup>60</sup>

Underlying socio-economic challenges help explain why sustained coca eradication has been so difficult. First, coca grows everywhere, unlike other goods that cannot be grown in the Andes Mountains and the jungle.<sup>61</sup> Second, peasants are paid more for cultivating coca than other commodities. Third, major infrastructure challenges exist for getting licit goods to market. Fourth, individuals cultivating coca face security risks from the FARC, the BACRIM, and others if they refuse to cultivate coca. Manual eradication efforts, for example, have been hampered by the FARC’s use of land mines to protect coca crops.<sup>62</sup>

Cocaine production declined from an estimated 695 metric tons in 2000<sup>63</sup> to an estimated 200 metric tons by 2011.<sup>64</sup> Despite significant progress in disrupting cocaine production during the past decade, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC, has reported a sharp rise—52 percent—in cocaine production from 290 metric tons in 2013 to 442 metric tons in 2014.<sup>65</sup> Against this backdrop, President Santos, in particular, has led a growing chorus of leaders across the Americas calling for a re-examination of drug policy to one guided by science.<sup>66</sup>

## Demobilization and reintegration

Since 2002, the Colombian government has reintegrated more than 57,000 ex-combatants into Colombian society.<sup>67</sup> Of that number, slightly more than 30,000 were the result of the AUC demobilization between 2003 and 2006.<sup>68</sup> During the same period, about 22,000 guerillas, mostly FARC fighters, abandoned their posts and committed to reintegration efforts.<sup>69</sup> Major challenges, however, exist in terms of reintegrating ex-FARC combatants into society. Many of those who leave the guerillas are forced into the illicit commercial economy as a result of limited economic opportunities.<sup>70</sup>

## Internal displacement

Colombia faces a major challenge in addressing the vast number of people who have been displaced by its internal armed conflict. As of December 2014, there were 6,044,200 internally displaced individuals and 396,635 refugees.<sup>71</sup> Indigenous communities and Afro-Colombians, in part because of their presence in rural areas most affected by the internal armed conflict, have been particularly hard hit, comprising 73 percent of displacement victims in 2013.<sup>72</sup>

Land restitution also remains a major challenge in Colombia. The Santos administration has sought to address this problem as well as victim's rights with the Victims and Land Restitution Law—*Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras*. Given the sheer volume of claims; a legacy of informal land titling; the reluctance of many dispossessed people to return to rural Colombia after time spent in urban contexts; and violence against those engaged in land restitution efforts, implementation remains challenging.<sup>73</sup>

## Human rights

Along with internal displacements, human rights abuses—by nonstate as well as state actors—remain a serious concern in Colombia. As noted by the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the economic disparities and different realities experienced in urban and rural Colombia exacerbate the human rights situation in the country.<sup>74</sup> So too do persistent levels of impunity and significant inefficiencies in the country's judicial system.<sup>75</sup> Concerns also have been voiced regarding the implications of the recent government-FARC agreement on transitional justice for impunity and the long-term health of the rule of law in Colombia.<sup>76</sup>

## Institutional capacity

Institutional strengthening and capacity building across the Colombian government has not kept pace with the tremendous advancements made by Colombia's security institutions during the past 15 years. This institutional imbalance presents perhaps the most significant challenge to consolidating and preserving Colombia's recent security, economic, and social gains. Institutions charged with providing basic services do not have the planning capacities or implementing processes and capabilities needed to govern the entirety of the Colombian territory effectively. Establishing effective governance throughout the country and across public institutions is the key to consolidating Colombia's gains. Colombia, for example, lags well behind comparable Latin American countries in terms of paved roads, with 300 kilometers per 1 million inhabitants compared with Argentina's more than 1,600 kilometers per 1 million inhabitants. It has been slow to close that gap even as security has improved in large measure due to long-standing institutional weaknesses at the Ministry of Transport.<sup>77</sup>

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## The way ahead

President Santos' visit to Washington provides not only an occasion to take stock of what the U.S.-Colombia relationship has yielded, but it also provides a critical opportunity to envision how the partnership should continue to evolve to reflect new realities—in Colombia, in the Americas, and in the world.

## Peace partners

Just as confronting Colombia's security crisis required partnership with the United States, so too will consolidating and sustaining peace. Doing so will require overcoming the U.S. habit of prematurely declaring victory in the Americas and moving on to a new challenge.<sup>78</sup> Continued support to Colombia, however, does not mean identical support. Just as the nature of U.S. support has evolved during the past 15 years, support going forward must keep pace with changing realities.

### *Security cooperation: Recognizing opportunities and limits*

Colombia's security institutions, for example, will need support as they transition to new roles and missions—in Colombia and beyond. This will be particularly true as the National Police, with its approximately 180,000 members,<sup>79</sup> bears more responsibility across the Colombian territory and as Colombia's armed forces move toward a more supporting role, with a growing focus on international engagements. In offering support, however, the United States needs to be cognizant of its limits and be open to Colombia broadening its security partnerships, as one key to Plan Colombia's success was its focus on areas, such as technology and equipment, where the United States had unique competitive advantages.

This is not to say that the U.S.-Colombia security partnership has reached the end of the road; far from it. Colombia is, for example, uniquely positioned to be an exporter of security expertise in the Americas. The United States and Colombia already engage in trilateral security cooperation and training in the Americas<sup>80</sup>—training that in many cases is both more effective and more economical because of Colombian participation than if the United States engaged alone. This cooperation needs to be expanded with a continued, but not exclusive, focus on Central America and the Caribbean.

#### *Counternarcotics, alternative economic development, and marginalized communities*

Counternarcotics efforts will continue to be a key feature in the U.S.-Colombia relationship. It is imperative that as the debate and approach to drug policy evolves in each country, with greater emphasis on addressing the drug scourge as a public health challenge, cooperation models and programs reflect those new realities and not lag behind. It also will be critical to bring to bear U.S. expertise in alternative development to better integrate rural and marginalized communities into Colombia's economy and into the global economy. Unlocking Colombia's rural economic potential also will require effectively eliminating the land mines and improvised explosive devices dotting the Colombian countryside.<sup>81</sup> Although the precise scope of Colombia's land mine problem is unknown because their use has been concentrated in conflict zones to which international anti-mine experts still do not have access, one thing is clear: Existing U.S. support for demining efforts, as well as support from others in the international community, will need to be ramped up significantly.<sup>82</sup>

#### *Institutional capacity*

To consolidate security gains, Colombia must foster greater institutional capacity and socio-economic reform across the Colombian government. Here too the United States can play a role. Doing so will require leveraging expertise from portions of the U.S. government that are less frequently engaged in international affairs and encouraging greater subfederal cooperation between cities and states in the United States and municipal and departmental governments in Colombia, as much of the U.S. expertise in providing basic government services resides at the state and local levels.

A critical area of cooperation will be continuing efforts to foster stronger Colombian rule of law institutions. Helping modernize Colombia's rule of law institutions has been part of U.S. support for Colombia throughout the past 15 years. The pace of modernization and improvement of those institutions must accelerate, particularly as a new transitional justice infrastructure is brought on-line if a FARC deal is reached and ratified. Colombia has been long plagued by high levels of impunity and corruption, with, for example, nearly 95 percent of 3,000 cases of labor-related murders accumulated over the past three decades remaining unprosecuted.<sup>83</sup> More effective rule of law institutions are critical to breaking long-standing cycles of impunity that have fostered insecurity, including for labor leaders, human rights activists, and other outspoken members of civil society. They are also crucial for improving Colombia's business and investment environment and for rooting out corruption. All these efforts will help deepen and improve governance across the country.

## Global partners

Like other countries in the Americas, Colombia today is far more globally connected than at any point in its history. This global emergence presents a distinct opportunity for the United States, as its most reliable partner in Latin America can become a like-minded global partner on a variety of issues in a host of forums. Building out a meaningful global partnership—in the following ways, among others—should be a focus for the next 15 years in the U.S.-Colombia relationship.

### *Global security partners*

In Colombia's hoped-for postconflict era, the Colombian Armed Forces will play an important, supporting role in combating remnants of the guerrillas and paramilitaries but will need to expand its global engagements, sharing its experiences and deploying its capacities to help support the wider aim of global security. As the internal armed conflict ends, Colombia's military seems poised to participate in U.N. peacekeeping missions. To that end, in January 2015, then-National Defense Minister Pinzón signed an agreement with the United Nations setting the path for Colombian participation.<sup>84</sup> Efforts such as the 2013 Colombia-NATO Agreement on the Security of Information,<sup>85</sup> which focuses on cooperation and consultation and sharing experiences and expertise in the areas of counternarcotics and counterterrorism, should be continued, as such efforts will deepen the military's ties with global security-providing institutions. Finally, the strong operational relationship between the United States and Colombian militaries should allow Colombia to deploy its forces in some joint operations, not unlike other major U.S. global security partners.

### *Asia-Pacific partners*

In recent years, Colombia, through the Pacific Alliance—a regional integration project involving Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Mexico—has begun to embrace a Pacific identity. That embrace faces challenges given that Colombia's Pacific region is relatively sparsely populated and suffers from a significant infrastructure deficit, severe economic underdevelopment, and attendant high levels of insecurity. Nevertheless, as the Asia-Pacific region consolidates its role in the global economy, the United States and Colombia will each continue to engage with Asian partners. As global partners, the United States and Colombia should find ways to do so together. Colombia, for example, is the only Pacific Alliance member that is not today a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC, forum. The United States should do all that it can to rectify that omission. As U.S. economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific region continues to evolve, every effort should be made to ensure that like-minded partners in the Americas, such as Colombia, are incorporated therein.

### *Energy and climate partners*

Colombia is both one of the world's most biodiverse countries and one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.<sup>86</sup> As home to 6 percent of the world's forests and as the world's third water-richest country, protecting Colombia's environment is a shared interest with global implications.<sup>87</sup> Colombia's climate vulnerability has

made it a leader in confronting climate change by adapting national policies, such as its national low-carbon development strategy to slow the advance of greenhouse gases.<sup>88</sup> In addition to continuing to partner bilaterally to protect Colombia's environment,<sup>89</sup> Colombia's experience also makes it a potentially helpful partner for the United States and others around the globe as countries work to fulfill commitments made in the recent Paris climate agreement.

### *Educational partners*

Like countries across the Americas, Colombia suffers from an innovation gap, undermining its global competitiveness and thus its long-term stability. The United States can and should play a role in helping Colombia close that gap. One way to do so is to deepen ties between engines of innovation in the United States—higher education institutions—and their Colombian counterparts.

Increasing educational exchanges in the Americas, including efforts with Colombia, has been a hallmark of President Obama's approach to the region.<sup>90</sup> That work should continue going forward and do so with an emphasis on building educational ties that broaden access to education and international exchange opportunities beyond elites. As should be the case in any true partnership, the benefits of such increased exchanges would not be exclusive to Colombia; U.S. competitiveness also would benefit as its students were enriched by international study opportunities, as would U.S. standing in the world as international students got a firsthand opportunity to form opinions of and establish bonds with the United States and the American people.

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## Conclusion

During the course of the past 15 years, across three administrations in both Colombia and the United States, the two countries have worked hand in hand to tackle the most significant security challenge facing the Americas at the turn of the 21st century. Although work undoubtedly remains to make the security and economic gains in Colombia felt in all corners of the country and at all socio-economic levels, the partnership of the past 15 years provides a strong foundation for achieving those goals. It also provides a platform from which the United States and Colombia can expand their work together to tackle common challenges that lay beyond their respective borders. In short, while there is much to celebrate in the successes of the U.S.-Colombia partnership, there is also much that remains to be done.

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