

Statement of

Celina B. Realuyo¹

Adjunct Professor

The George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs

on

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Introduction

Thank you Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the current security and economic challenges facing Colombia and the need to deepen U.S. engagement. Colombia is one of the closest partners of the U.S. in Latin America, sharing democratic values, free-market capitalism, and mutual security interests. Colombia is facing a triple crisis of mass social protests, increased insecurity and serious fiscal and economic challenges from the pandemic. These internal crises along with external actors like Venezuela, China and Russia and an expanding illicit economy are destabilizing the political, economic, social, and security aspects of Colombia ahead of their presidential elections. The U.S. must redouble its efforts to strengthen its partnership with Colombia to assist the country confront the formidable challenges to security, democracy and post-pandemic economic fallout and realize free and fair elections this year.

The U.S.-Colombia Strategic Partnership

This year, Colombia and the United States commemorate 200 years of bilateral relations between two of the oldest democracies in the Western Hemisphere. Colombia is one of the U.S.'s closest partners in Latin America with a strong record of promoting democracy, capitalism, and security in the region. With the support of the United States, Colombia has transformed itself over the past 20 years from a nearly failed state threatened by a narco-insurgency into a sound democracy with a thriving market economy. The two countries have been instrumental in promoting prosperity and security in Latin America.

The U.S. is Colombia's largest trade and investment partner, due in part to the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) that was implemented in 2012, with a two-way goods trade of \$29 billion and a services trade of \$11.7 billion in 2019 alone. Meanwhile, Colombia is the U.S.' third-largest trade partner in Latin America, with two-

way trade in goods and services totaling \$29.9 billion in 2020. U.S.-owned affiliates account for more than 90,000 jobs in Colombia.² As the U.S. looks for near-sourcing opportunities to decrease supply chain dependency on Asia that made it so vulnerable during the pandemic, Colombia is a logical counterpart to expand bilateral trade in Latin America.

For the past twenty years, Colombia has been a steadfast U.S. ally in the “war on drugs” and security cooperation. For over five decades, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP) threatened to overthrow the established order in Colombia and replace it with a socialist dictatorship. The FARC sustained itself through the cocaine trade for years. In its attempts to destabilize the government, the FARC carried out bombings, extortions, selective assassinations, kidnappings and armed confrontations with Colombian police and military forces. In 2000, the U.S. launched a partnership called “Plan Colombia” to provide security and economic development assistance to help combat the spread of narcotics, train military and law enforcement, and promote economic growth. Through “Plan Colombia,” the U.S. and Colombia have built a strong counterterrorism and counter-narcotics partnership to combat the cocaine trade and armed groups like the FARC and ELN. Since 2000, the U.S. government has provided about \$12 billion in bilateral aid to help implement “Plan Colombia” and its successor strategies.³ Further afield, Colombia has also provided security expertise across Latin America, training thousands of military and police personnel in Central and South America. This included Colombia’s participation in the “Merida Initiative” in Mexico, “Plan Colombia’s” Mexican cousin, which became critical to security and counternarcotics operations within Mexico and at the U.S. southern border.⁴

Colombia’s History of Armed Groups and the FARC Peace Accord

² State Department Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, U.S. Relations with Colombia, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, July 19, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-colombia/>

³ Congressional Research Service, Colombia: Challenges for U.S. Policymakers in 2021, September 22, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11631/4>

⁴ Diego Felipe Vera, “Cooperación Internacional de Seguridad: El Caso de Colombia (International Cooperation and Security: The Case of Colombia),” p. 44, <https://esdeguelibros.edu.co/index.php/editorial/catalog/download/28/24/404?inline=1>

With a population of approximately 50 million, Colombia has experienced high levels of violence and citizen insecurity due to internal armed conflict and narco-insurgency. Fifty years of violence with guerilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) have resulted in over 220,000 deaths, 81% of them civilians and almost made Colombia a failed state.⁵ More than nine million Colombians, or roughly 17% of the population, have registered as conflict victims.⁶ Colombia's insurgent and other armed groups have been sustained by the shadow, illicit economy through the lucrative cocaine trade, as well as illegal gold-mining and oil-smuggling operations. Colombian organized criminal groups, such as drug trafficking mafias and paramilitary groups, are well armed and dangerous. The economic impact of conflict, terrorism, homicides and sexual assaults in Colombia was over \$275 billion, 34 per cent of the country's GDP, in 2017. This figure also includes the costs of containing violence as well as the consequences of violence on the economy. Colombia was ranked 10th (out of 11 countries) in South America and 144th overall on the 2021 Global Peace Index. The country recorded a deterioration in its overall score as a result of increases in violence violent demonstrations and political terror.⁷

In 2016, President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) brokered an historic peace accord with the FARC, the country's largest leftist guerrilla organization at the time. That peace agreement, ratified by Colombia's Congress, included an immediate cease-fire, disarmament and demobilization process, the creation of a transitional justice system and the recognition of the FARC as a legitimate political party with ten guaranteed seats in Congress until 2026.⁸ During a U.N.-monitored demobilization in 2017, some 13,300 FARC members disarmed. The FARC later transformed from a leftist guerrilla army into a political party known as Comunes. Neither the government nor the FARC have upheld all their commitments under the agreement. Although the FARC has formally demobilized, its leadership has not yet been subject to the Colombian justice system, and

⁵ Basta Ya! Colombia: Memorias de Guerra y Dignidad, Center for Historical Memory, at <http://www.centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/informeGeneral/>

⁶ Government of Colombia, Victims Unit, at <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es>

⁷ Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Peace Index 2021: measuring peace in a complex world" Sydney, June 2021.

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, U.S.-Colombia Relations 1903 – 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-colombia-relations>

FARC dissident groups continue to engage in violence and illicit activities in Colombia and Venezuela. In early December 2021, on the fifth anniversary of the signing of the peace accord, the U.S. government removed the FARC from its list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and designated two FARC dissident groups, Segundo Marquetalia and FARC-EP, as FTOs.⁹ According to one estimate, some 90 armed groups remain active in Colombia—including some former FARC and rightwing paramilitaries that continued criminal activities after their respective disarmaments.¹⁰

The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN) is another violent guerrilla group with left-wing political ideologies operating in Colombia. Initially a Marxist-Leninist nationalist movement, it is more focused on kidnapping, extortion and attacks on economic infrastructure and increasingly linked to the narcotics trade. The group has prospered since the demobilization of the FARC. In 2016, when the FARC was abandoning much of its territory, the ELN moved in to take over drug trafficking and contraband activities, especially in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander and in the northwestern department of Chocó. This greatly increased the ELN's criminal profits and expanded its manpower and territorial control.¹¹

President Juan Manuel Santos tried to reach a peace deal similar to one with the FARC in 2016. In September 2017, the two sides signed a ceasefire which ran from October 1 to January 9, 2018, but no similar ceasefire has been signed since. President Ivan Duque (2018-Present) campaigned as a critic of the FARC peace accords and suspended existing talks with the ELN upon assuming office. He cited the ELN's continued violence and failure to comply with agreements made during the Santos administration. The ELN is currently considered the most powerful criminal group in Colombia and Venezuela, dominating much of the criminal economies along the border. It controls vast areas of coca crops, cocaine production and distribution routes and is

⁹ "U.S. Revokes Terrorist Designation for Colombia's FARC," Reuters, November 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-revokes-terrorist-designation-colombias-farc-2021-11-30/>

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations, December 16, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R43813.pdf>

¹¹ InSight Crime, Colombia ELN Backgrounder, October 27, 2020, <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/el-n-profile/>

actively involved in illegal gold mining. Well supported by the Maduro regime in Venezuela in exchange for a cut of criminal profits, the ELN has become a truly transnational criminal organization.¹²

Recent clashes between the FARC dissidents and ELN has resulted increased violence along the Colombian-Venezuelan border as the groups battle over control of the lucrative narcotics and illegal gold trade. On January 7, 2022, Colombia's Attorney General warned that the fight between the FARC dissidents and ELN was expanding in three border areas, Norte de Santander, Arauca and Casanare. He also noted that ex-FARC forces after taking on multiple enemies on Venezuelan soil were moving from their stronghold in Norte de Santander to attack the ELN in Arauca, a Colombian department on the border with Venezuela.¹³

The Role of External Actors in Colombia

External state actors are becoming increasingly active in Colombia. Colombia and greater Latin America serve as an expanded theater for great power competition. The growing influence of China, Russia and Venezuela in Colombia is a direct challenge to the U.S.–Colombian partnership and has profound implications for regional security.

Venezuela: The criminalized state in Venezuela under the Maduro regime is threatening Colombia's security and sovereignty and has created the largest humanitarian crisis in Latin America with some six million migrants fleeing Venezuela. Colombia is a key U.S. partner in ongoing efforts to help Venezuela return to democracy and economic prosperity. Colombia has been essential in coordinating regional support for Interim President Juan Guaidó, as well as condemning Maduro's authoritarian regime. Colombia has welcomed over 1.8 million Venezuelans fleeing the Maduro regime and providing assistance to its Latin American neighbors. In early 2021, President Ivan Duque reported that Venezuelans residing in Colombia comprised nearly 40% of the Venezuelan exodus. The

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Juan Diego Posada, "Ex-FARC Mafia vs. ELN: a Fight Too Far at Colombia-Venezuela Border?," InSight Crime, January 11, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/is-the-ex-farc-mafia-betting-all-its-chips-on-the-colombian-venezuelan-border/>

U.S. government has committed more than \$700 million to help Colombia address the Venezuelan crisis and support the Venezuelan refugees that Colombia hosts.¹⁴

Since it assumed power in August 2018, the Duque government has been dealing with increased provocation by the Maduro regime. Colombia has been the primary target of Venezuela's national security strategy since the dawn of the Bolivarian revolution in 1999.¹⁵ Due to Colombia's geostrategic location and its close ties to the U.S., Venezuela's Chavista regime and other malign external actors have an asymmetric strategy to exploit illicit networks and illicit economies to destabilize Colombia.¹⁶

The Maduro regime relies on close ties with U.S. rivals like Cuba, China, Iran, Nicaragua and Russia to support their economy and circumvent harsh economic sanctions. It also has proven ties with Colombian illicit armed groups including the ELN and FARC-D. In Venezuela's collapse, the ELN has found safe haven and opportunities to set up bases throughout rural Venezuela. While there has certainly been some friction, and at least one deadly skirmish, between the ELN and the Venezuelan military, the two more often cooperate with one another than fight each other. The Colombian military believes the Venezuelan armed forces are now actively training the ELN to use sophisticated weaponry.¹⁷

China: China's diplomatic, commercial and technological interests in Colombia have grown in recent years. China is now Colombia's second most important trading partner after the U.S., with average annual exports between 2011 and 2020 of \$3.4 billion per year almost seven times as large as those in the prior decade. Imports of \$9.9 billion now represent almost a quarter of Colombia's total imports. Backed by Beijing with state financial support, Chinese companies have been winning major infrastructure projects, including the long-awaited Bogotá metro, the Bogotá regional railway, many Colombian

¹⁴ U.S. Embassy in Colombia, Colombia and the United States: Strengthening our Partnership, October 9, 2019, <https://co.usembassy.gov/colombia-and-the-united-states-strengthening-our-partnership/>

¹⁵ Max Manwaring, Venezuela as an Exporter of 4th Generation Warfare Instability, U.S. Army War College Press, December 2012

¹⁶ Joseph M. Humire, "Assymetric Assault on Colombia," Secure and Free Society, May 17, 2021, <https://www.securefreesociety.org/research/asymmetric-assault-on-colombia/>

¹⁷ Francisco Toro, Venezuela's implosion is becoming Colombia's security nightmare," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/05/venezuelas-implosion-is-becoming-colombias-security-nightmare/>

4G and 5G infrastructure projects and a major new gold mine in Antioquia. Many of these projects resulted after President Iván Duque's visit to Beijing in 2019, when he promoted Chinese investment in Colombia. Seeking closer ties, he has hinted that Colombia may formally join the Belt and Road Initiative before he leaves office in 2022.¹⁸

Another asymmetric weapon in Beijing's arsenal is vaccine diplomacy. China's woefully inadequate, but readily available, Sinovac coronavirus vaccine was used as leverage in Colombia to pressure the Duque government to allow China's telecommunications company (and direct conduit to Chinese military intelligence), Huawei, to participate in the 5G spectrum auction in Colombia sometime in 2022—a dual-track diplomatic effort that China also initiated in Brazil.¹⁹ Although Colombia has been the largest recipient of vaccine donations from the U.S., receiving 6 million doses out of the 38 million donated by the U.S. government, the early arrival of Sinovac vaccines during February and March 2021 “saved the day” by preventing thousands of deaths among the elderly. Indeed, by the end of March 2021, Colombia had received 3.5 million doses, of which 2.5 million came from China. In this sense, U.S. vaccine diplomacy to Colombia was generous, but China came first when it most mattered.²⁰

Russia. According to Colombian security officials, the Russian military intelligence services have been active in Colombia in recent years. In December 2020, Colombia tracked unusual movements of diplomatic personnel from the Russian embassy in Bogotá, leading to the expulsion of at least two “diplomats” in December of last year—a first in Colombia–Russia relations.²¹ This was followed by a Russian military aircraft

¹⁸ John Padilla and Sergio Guzman, “As China Eyes Colombia, the United States Is AWOL,” *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/25/colombia-china-latin-america-belt-road-biden/>

¹⁹ James M. Roberts, Mateo Haydar, Joseph M. Humire and Celina Realuyo, “America's Longtime Friend, Colombia, Needs U.S. Help,” Heritage Foundation, December 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/americas/report/americas-longtime-friend-colombia-needs-us-help>

²⁰ Luis Fernando Mejía Colombia, “Washington's “Closest Ally,” Looks to Beijing,” *Americas Quarterly*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/colombia-washingtons-closest-ally-looks-to-beijing/>

²¹ “Colombia Confirms Exit of Russian Officials, Local Media Alleges Spying,” Reuters, December 22, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-russia/colombia-confirms-exit-of-russian-officials-local-media-alleges-spying-idUSKBN28W2A5>

violating Colombian airspace just days before the uproar of social protests began in April 2021. While the Colombian government protested the incident, repeated violations of Colombian airspace by Russian-manufactured Venezuelan military drones has added to the complexity of the conflict on the Colombia–Venezuela border. In May 2021, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano accused Russia of conducting cyberattacks against the Colombian Army and Senate infrastructure, that Russia denied.²²

Russia is a close partner of the Maduro regime and has sold more than \$11 billion worth of armament to Venezuela since 2005. The presence of Russian military advisers and contractors has become routine in Venezuela. In December 2021, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said he would not rule out Moscow deploying forces to allies Venezuela or Cuba if diplomacy failed with the United States over Ukraine, where Moscow has massed tens of thousands of troops. In February 2022, Russia promised Colombia's Foreign Minister and Vice President Marta Lucia Ramirez that military equipment given to Venezuela would not be used to attack Colombia, destabilize Latin America or end up in the hands of illegal armed groups. Colombia's Defense Minister Molano reported that Venezuela was moving troops to the countries' border with technical assistance from Russia and Iran and called the possible deployment "foreign interference." Molano, citing intelligence sources, said there were troop movements opposite Colombia's Arauca province, which has seen fierce fighting between National Liberation Army (ELN) guerillas and former FARC rebels for control of the drugs trade.²³

In recent years, Russia has leveraged its sophisticated propaganda capability to impact public opinion and perceptions across Latin America. Such efforts include overt Russian media such as Sputnik and Russia Today, as well as social media efforts through platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The high level of distrust in the

²² Guido L. Torres, "Nonlinear Warfare: Is Russia Waging a Silent War in Latin America?," *Small Wars Journal*, January 24, 2022, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/nonlinear-warfare-russia-waging-silent-war-latin-america>

²³ "Russia says military aid to Venezuela will not be used to attack Colombia," *Reuters*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/russia-says-military-aid-venezuela-will-not-be-used-attack-colombia-2022-02-08/>

region toward government discourse and traditional media has made Latin America and the Caribbean particularly vulnerable to such initiatives. Russia has used that capability not so much to create opinion favorable toward Russia, but rather, to foment instability and undermine regimes aligned with the West. Both the Colombian and Chilean governments have accused Russian social media agents of contributing to the radicalization of protests and destabilization in their countries.²⁴

Colombia has become the focal point for top U.S. adversaries in this era of great-power competition. Abandoning or reducing support to Colombia does not come without unintended consequences, of which the most detrimental to U.S. national security is the likely expansion of Russian and Chinese influence from Venezuela to Colombia.

Current Challenges Facing Colombia

President Ivan Duque's popularity has declined over the past year as his government has struggled to address serious political, economic and security challenges in Colombia. These include mass anti-government protests, spikes in coca cultivation and cocaine production, frustration with pandemic response, violence against human rights and other social activists and instability spilling over from Venezuela. Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted health, economic security, and democratic indicators in Colombia and countries around the world. Colombia has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic with one of the highest rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Latin America²⁵ and with a gross domestic product (GDP) contraction of -6.8 percent in 2020 due to strict national lockdown policies.²⁶ The pandemic became a catalyst and force-multiplier for the explosion of pre-existing socio-economic grievances and the emboldening of political opponents of both the Duque

²⁴ R. Evan Ellis, "Russia's Latest Return to Latin America," Global Americans, January 19, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/01/russia-return-latin-america/>

²⁵ Congressional Research Service, "Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19," October 15, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11581.pdf>

²⁶ World Bank, "The World Bank in Colombia: Overview," March 24, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/colombia/overview>

Administration and democratic institutions, resulting in mass protests that paralyzed Colombian cities.

Nationwide protests broke out over an unpopular government-proposed tax increase in mid-2021. The national strike lasted for nearly eight weeks as diverse sectors protested about a host of grievances, including economic inequality, crime, police brutality against demonstrators, and unaddressed corruption. Colombia's large social protests, labor strikes, and violent clashes with police made international news in April 2021, but had already been underway in November 2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic. These protests were similar to the social and political unrest witnessed in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru since 2019. In Colombia, the protests were fueled by social and economic grievances due to long-standing inequalities and high youth and female unemployment. Unfortunately, Colombia still faces high levels of poverty. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 37.5 percent of Colombians lived below the poverty line at the end of 2020. More than two-thirds of Colombian households make less than \$600 USD in total monthly income.²⁷

There were allegations of agitators and fake news fueling the protests via social media and human rights abuses by Colombian security forces. Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano reported on May 3, 2021 that at least six criminal groups, including FARC dissidents (FARC-D), the ELN, and the Blue and Black Shields of the M-19 youth movement were behind the acts of violence and vandalism during Colombia's protests in 2021.²⁸ The crippling blockades across Colombia and vandalism resulted in an estimated \$3 billion of damage.

From April 28 to July 31, 2021, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia received more than 60 allegations of deaths in the context of the mass protests. So far, it has verified the deaths of 46 people: 44 civilians and two police officers; most of the documented deaths, 76 percent, were

²⁷ Veronica Uribe-Kessler, "Guest View: Colombia's Struggle Against Poverty," *Reuters*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/guest-view-colombias-struggle-against-poverty-2021-05-11/>

²⁸ Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombia Blames Armed Groups for Protest Violence, Death Toll Still Unclear," *Reuters*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombia-blames-armed-groups-protest-violence-death-toll-still-unclear-2021-05-03/>

from gunshot wounds. The UN office in Colombia conducted more than 620 interviews with victims and witnesses, and examined 83 videos, including mobile phone footage of the protests and related incidents. Based on this analysis, there are reasonable grounds to believe police officers were responsible for at least 28 of the deaths with members of the National Police's Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD) involved in at least 10 cases. Non-state actors are believed to have killed 10 people, while there is insufficient information to determine the likely perpetrators of eight other deaths. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on Colombia to urgently reform how it polices protests in the wake of demonstrations in 2021 in which several people were killed or injured.²⁹ In response, the Colombian government has embarked on a broad reform of its police to include respect for human rights and just received \$8 million of U.S. assistance for human rights training for the police on February 8, 2022.³⁰

The security situation in Colombia has been deteriorating significantly and will be a key issue in the upcoming presidential and legislative elections. In September 2021, Colombia's Military Commander General Luis Fernando Navarro stated that about 1,900 fighters belonging to Colombian rebel and crime groups are operating from Venezuela, where they plan attacks and engage in drug trafficking. The Colombian government has long said Venezuela's leadership grants safe harbor to Colombian armed groups, allowing trafficking of cocaine in exchange for a cut of the profits. One FARC dissident group has taken responsibility for a car bombing at a military base in the border city of Cucuta which injured 44 in June and the June 25, 2021 failed assassination attempt against President Ivan Duque, the shooting of a helicopter transporting him.³¹

According to InSight Crime, murders in Colombia rose to a level not seen in seven years a turnaround for the Andean nation, which had made great strides in reducing killings. According to the National Police, the country tallied 13,709 homicides in 2021, pushing its homicide rate up from a low of 23.8 per 100,000 people in 2020, to 26.8 last

²⁹ OHCHR, UN rights office urges Colombia to reform policing of protests, December 15, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1107992>

³⁰ EE. UU. anuncia una donación de 8 millones de dólares a la Policía de Colombia, *El Espectador*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.elespectador.com/mundo/americas/estados-unidos-donara-8-millones-de-dolares-a-la-policia-de-colombia/>

³¹ Luis Jaime Acosta, "Some 1,900 Colombian guerrillas operating from Venezuela, says Colombia military chief," *Reuters*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/exclusive-some-1900-colombian-guerrillas-operating-venezuela-says-colombia-2021-09-30/>

year. Last year's total killings, however, rose eight percent when compared with 2019, and 2021 was the first year since 2013 that Colombia surpassed 13,000 murders. Violence, meanwhile, surged in the country's lawless Colombia-Venezuela border. The northeastern jungle region of Catatumbo, home to an abundance of coca crops, came under siege in a war between a dissident front of the demobilized FARC and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN), Colombia's largest guerrilla group. On the other side of the country, the southwestern departments of Cauca and Valle de Cauca recorded nearly 100 people killed in 26 massacres. Both departments are critical for moving drugs out of the Pacific or to Ecuador and are a hot spot for criminal actors, including three dissident FARC fronts, the ELN and the Urabeños drug gang, also known as the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo). In the central Antioquia department, 52 people were murdered in 14 massacres.³² This increase in violence is linked to the lucrative illicit economy and is destabilizing parts of Colombia.

Anti-government protests, frustrations over the pandemic response, increasing insecurity, economic concerns and instability in Venezuela will be on Colombians' minds at the March 13 parliamentary and May 29 presidential elections this year. Discontent with the current administration has President Duque at record low approval ratings. If the elections were conducted today, left-leaning candidate Gustavo Petro, former M19 guerrilla and mayor of Bogota would likely win the presidency. He was a presidential candidate in 2018 who finished second with over eight million votes (43%) in the second round against Ivan Duque. There are fears that new violent protests, disinformation campaigns and election meddling might occur and attempt to destabilize Colombia.

Measures to Deepen U.S.-Colombian Cooperation

The U.S. must redouble its efforts to support Colombia, its closest democratic partner in Latin America as it faces mass social protests, increasing insecurity, external actors and serious economic challenges from the pandemic. Colombia needs assistance to defend its democratic institutions, open economy and sovereignty and ensure free and fair

³² InSight Crime's 2021 Homicide Round-Up, February 1, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crimes-2021-homicide-round-up/>

elections in 2022. To deepen U.S. partnership with Colombia at this challenging time, the Biden Administration and Congress should:

1. Increase security assistance to Colombia to support the police and the military to counter armed groups and the lucrative drug trade. Security assistance should focus on the growing instability and illicit economy along the shared border with Venezuela and the Pacific Ocean ports.
2. Expand the use of financial intelligence by supporting the Center for Combatting Illicit Finances (CFI) and the creation of an interagency group to counter money laundering led by Colombia's Attorney General to combat, prosecute and dismantle illicit networks.
3. Assist with the professionalization and reform of Colombia's military and police forces and include more human rights and rule of law training.
4. Continue collaborative efforts towards bringing security, stability and democracy back to Venezuela.
5. Support Colombia's broad cybersecurity efforts to safeguard its sensitive data and communications and other critical infrastructure.
6. Boost Colombia's counterintelligence capabilities to closely monitor the growing activities of external actors like China, Russia and Venezuela in Colombia.
7. Identify and assist legitimate civil society groups in Colombia to address disinformation and misinformation efforts by internal and hostile foreign actors.
8. Promote U.S. investment in Colombian infrastructure projects, especially in areas that are economically isolated and vulnerable to organized crime, to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and 5G technology aspirations.
9. Facilitate more bilateral trade between the U.S. and Colombia as part of a U.S. near-sourcing and supply chain resilience strategy.
10. Continue to work closely with Colombians in their pandemic recovery efforts through both public and private sector coordination.