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# Colombia's Tragic Downward Security Spiral

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## Introduction

During the middle of May 2025, I had the opportunity to travel to Bogota, Colombia, to give addresses to the country's National War College and the New Granada Military University, and to interact with senior Colombian security and defense personnel regarding the challenges facing the country. The trip was particularly meaningful for me, insofar as my own work on Latin American security issues since the late 1990s has coincided with Colombia's transformation from a country whose governance was once crumbling from the mutually reinforcing scourges of drug corruption and guerilla violence, to Colombia becoming the region's foremost [security success story](#), U.S. partner, and [exporter of security](#) to its neighbors.

Colombia's dramatic success during that period makes particularly tragic the reversals in the decade since Colombia signed [a flawed agreement with the FARC](#), accelerated by the socioeconomic [shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic](#), and the [disastrous "total peace"](#) efforts of the nation's current administration of Gustavo Petro. Highlighting how sharply Colombia's security situation has eroded in recent years, my visit coincided with a rash of targeted assassinations, called "[Plan Pistola](#)" (the "pistol plan"), because it was reminiscent of the assassinations employed in the 1990s against the state as a tool of terror by Colombian narco strongman Pablo Escobar. By May 2025, *Plan Pistola* assassinations had taken the lives of [27 police and security officials](#) across the country. In recent months there have further been a rash of [attacks using hand grenades](#) across Bogota.



Beyond such “terrorism,” kidnapping has also re-emerged as a threat in Colombia, with [131 reported incidents](#) in the first four months of 2025 alone, a reminder of the dark times when Colombians feared to travel beyond the limits of the urban areas where they lived, for fear of being kidnapped for ransom by guerillas who openly set up roadblocks just outside of the capital and elsewhere, engaged in *pesca milagrosa* (“miraculous fishing expeditions”) in the hopes of finding wealthy Colombians worth holding for ransom.

As during the 1990s, Colombia once again faces an explosion of drug production, [expanding 53%](#) from 2023 to 2024 alone, according to the United Nations Office on Drug Control (UNODC). The revenues from and activities of the rapidly expanding illicit economy are corrupting Colombia’s institutions. At the same time, Colombia is also beset by the growing numbers, and diverse criminal activities of armed groups that have dramatically undermined citizen security and impeded government control and economic activity across the country. The nation is also presently suffering from political paralysis and polarization, complicated by political infighting and multiple corruption scandals involving President Petro and his “Historic Pact” movement. In international affairs, Colombia is reeling from both [significantly higher tariffs](#) on products it exports to the U.S. plus [strong sanctions](#) following its refusal to accept U.S. military aircraft deporting its nationals. Numerous senior Colombians with whom I spoke expressed concern that the [U.S. might “decertify” it](#) as cooperating against drugs, a decision which could lead to a decimating cutoff of U.S. security support.

A number of the senior officers with whom I spoke in Bogota privately expressed their sadness at the rapid erosion of the security and governance in Colombia, won at the cost of so many of the lives of their soldiers and citizens. Although the Colombian economy continues to function, and its

security forces continue to be among the most professional and capable in the region, my most significant and worrisome impression from my time in Bogota is that the nation with so much education and creative energy, is once again on a downward spiral whose “bottom,” is not yet in sight.

## Colombia's Security Deterioration

The policies of the Petro administration arguably accelerated the deterioration of a security situation in Colombia, which had been unraveling since the 2016 “peace accords” with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Those accords, [rejected by Colombians](#) in a national referendum, but then modestly [revised and implemented](#) by the Juan Manuel Santos government without a new plebiscite, unleashed two destructive effects: First, it encouraged an [explosion of coca production](#) (which had painstakingly been brought under control during the prior two decades), following the state's [2015 suspension of aerial spraying](#) of coca on environmental and health grounds. As the agreement with the FARC was implemented, Colombians believed that by planting coca, they would subsequently be “compensated” by the state for taking it out of production.

At the same time, the demobilization of the FARC, which on paper included their disarmament and later disbanding as an armed force, [was in practice not complete or permanent](#), nor was the Colombian state adequately positioned to prevent other groups from competing to operate in, and control, the territories the FARC was withdrawing from. Some of the FARC fronts which were deeply involved in illicit activities (the “dissidents”) continued to operate, sustained by illicit activities such as coca production, [joined by others who demobilized](#) but subsequently could not find employment or who were otherwise dissatisfied with their situation after the agreement. Others, lead by senior FARC commanders [Ivan Marquez](#) and Jesus Santrich, initially joined, but subsequently abandoned the agreement, returning to the field as the “Segundo Marquetalia.” Other FARC members, prior to or after formally demobilizing, [joined the once smaller separate leftist guerrilla organization](#) the National Liberation Army (ELN) or one of various armed criminal groups (GAO), the largest of which were the Urabeños, or Gulf Clan.



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These problems were compounded with the [failure of the government to adequately deliver on unrealistic promises of infrastructure and economic development in areas where the FARC previously operated](#), provide “transitional justice” that satisfied both the demobilized FARC and their victims, protect demobilized FARC members and community leaders [from others seeking retribution](#), or provide channels for political participation that produced [outcomes adequate to the expectations](#) of those demobilized.

There was never truly “peace” in Colombia following the 2016 accords, but rather, as had occurred following the implementation of similarly flawed agreements with paramilitary groups [in the 2003-2006 timeframe](#), there was an escalation of illicit activity and violence as an array of criminal and ideological groups, some with diminished, and others with augmented resources, waged new fights to control and operate in the territories partially vacated by the FARC.

As if such difficulties were not enough, the incentives to join the armed groups, or participate in illicit economies in Colombia were expanded by the negative economic and social impacts of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), which also distracted and imposed new requirements on state security forces, and decreased state resources for combatting armed groups. That economic and social crisis, in [combination with the false sense of security](#) created by the 2016 peace accord, also paved the way for the election of former M-19 guerilla Gustavo Petro, as Colombia’s President.

Petro’s approach to security included effectively [suspending almost all forced eradication of coca and actions against the smallholders who grew it](#). He also sought to extend the “peace” agreement with the FARC [to virtually all other non-state armed actors](#), including not only groups professing ideological roots such as the FARC dissidents (the “[Estado Mayor Conjunto](#)” [EMC] and



others), Segundo Marquetalia, and the ELN, as well as more purely “criminal” actors such as the Gulf Clan (who sought to represent themselves as a political group, the “Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia” (AGC), and [even urban gangs](#).

Petro’s approach led to simultaneous negotiations with nine different organizations and a constantly evolving set of “ceasefires” to enable negotiations, which almost invariably [broke down](#) due to violations by one part of the group or the other, as well as to the “splintering” of the groups between those disposed to negotiate, and those who are not. Attempted negotiations with the FARC dissidents, for example, have led to a split between talk with the EMC, lead by Ivan Mordisco, and the Jorge Briceño (Calarca) Block, [led by Calcara Cordoba, which refused](#), and whose [size has swelled](#), as it has continued to fight.

In some areas, the state’s commitments to one group have inhibited security forces from operating in the area, although other criminal groups with which it does not have such agreements, continue to conduct criminal and/or military activity there.

Compounding the challenge for security forces, the Petro government, upon arriving, [relieved 52 general officers](#) from the police and military, to get to those leaders that he wished to command Colombia’s security organizations. In the process, he forced into retirement many experienced leaders who had even unproven allegations of wrongdoing, such as human rights violations, on their record.

The massive retirement of senior leaders was accompanied by directives severely limiting how the armed forces could operate, including [halting aerial bombardment](#) of areas containing armed groups if there was a risk that minors were present at the site (something virtually impossible to rule out).

The effect of the combination of Petro's actions and policies was to significantly impair security force operations against armed groups.

## **Colombia's Present Crime and Insecurity Landscape**

As noted previously, Colombia continues to be the key source for cocaine produced in the region for both U.S. and European markets, although illegal mining and other illicit activities are also a significant problem. In 2024, Colombian authorities interdicted [almost 280 metric tons of cocaine](#), more than any other country in the Americas.

In addition, the use of the territory and ports of neighboring Ecuador to export cocaine produced in Colombia and conduct other operations, has been the primary driver of the unprecedented [explosion of violence](#) by [armed groups in that nation](#) in recent years, as well as Ecuador's placement in 2024 with the second greatest amount of cocaine interdicted in the hemisphere, with [252 metric tons seized](#).

Narcosubmarines and low observable vessels for drug transits is another problematic capability of criminal groups in Colombia. A significant portion of the 240 increasingly sophisticated narcosubmarines intercepted in preparation for or making ocean transits, were constructed in or launched [from facilities in Colombia](#), mostly on its Pacific coast.

With respect to armed groups operating in Colombia with an array of criminal and sometimes ideological motives, although the size and composition of those has shifted, the overall strength of

groups grew by 20% between 2022 and 2024 alone, and is now similar to that when the FARC first began to demobilize in 2016.

Colombian security experts interviewed for this work spoke of 17 major Armed Groups in Colombia, although the number is highly variable depending on which groups are counted, how semi-autonomous groups within an umbrella organization are counted.

Of the principal armed groups, the Gulf Clan (also known as the Urabeños, or Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia [AGC]) is presently the largest single organization, with an estimated 7,015 members. The ELN, including all of its semi-autonomous warfronts, has an estimated 6,012 members. The FARC dissident organization Estado Mayor Conjunto (EMC), comprised principally of the former 33rd FARC front, has an estimated 2,957. In addition, Calacara, which split from the EMC, refusing to engage with the Colombian government in peace negotiations, has grown significantly, and presently has 2,170 members. The 2nd Marquetalia, the smallest of the major groups, has an estimated 2,059 members.

As in other criminal conflict areas such as Mexico, the current security environment in Colombia is best understood in terms of multiple interrelated struggles, shaped by the predominant criminal opportunities, and geographic imperatives of each part of the country.

**Catatumbo.** COne key struggle is playing out along the Colombia-Venezuela border, focused on Catatumbo. For years, the ELN was permitted by the leftist Hugo Chavez and Nicholas Maduro regimes in Venezuela to operate on the Venezuelan side of the border, which benefitted the ELN as a sanctuary from the Colombian armed forces and a base for illicit earnings, particularly gold from the Orinoco River basin. For the Venezuelan regime, ELN presence served as a buffer against a US attack from Colombia, while also organizing the illicit economy in ways that benefit the regime. While FARC units including the 10th, 28th, and 33rd fronts, also operated there, the Maduro regime in Venezuela generally favored the ELN, indirectly supporting ELN activities. In direct combat operations by Venezuelan authorities against FARC elements in Apure in 2022, which drove many of the elements of the 10th and 28th FARC fronts from the Venezuelan side of the border.

In January 2025, in a struggle which may have been provoked by a FARC robbery of an ELN drug shipment, the Northern front of the ELN in Catatumbo engaged in major combat operations targeting the 33rd FARC dissident front (EMC), involving at least 29 combat incidents during January and February, ultimately killing at least 80 persons and displacing over 50,000 according to a United Nations estimate. On the Colombian side, the weakened 33rd Front is now negotiating



with the Colombian government, agreeing to “concentrate” in a special zone (ZUT) with its weapons, perhaps seeking to use the time to reconstitute its strength.

**Eastern Plains.** In the remote eastern plains region of Colombia, also bordering Venezuela and Brazil, where the ELN presence is more limited, a different fight is taking place over drug routes through the Amazon to Europe, between two factions of FARC dissidents, the EMC and Calarcá.

The waterways that flow through that region, including the Guainía river (Rio Negro en Brazil), Vaupés river, Caquetá river (Japura river in Brazil) and Putumayo river (Içá river in Brazil), ultimately connect to the Amazon basin, and thus serve as a route for moving drugs produced in Colombia (and Venezuela), including both cocaine and the country’s internationally known “creepy” marijuana,” as well as gold, coltan, and other illicitly obtained goods, to Europe. Each of the two FARC dissident groups operating there (both once part of the “Eastern Block”) work with Brazilian gangs including the First Capital Command (PCC) and the Red Command (CV) for those transits. The ELN, in the form of the Jose Daniel Perez Carrero Front, has some presence in the northern part of the zone along the Colombia Venezuela border, down to the Colombian province of Vichada, although prior ELN attempts to establish a “Southeastern” front to project a more significant presence in the region have been unsuccessful. The struggle between the two FARC dissident groups for control over the area have manifested themselves in several significant battles during 2025, including near the towns of Calamar (Guaviare) and Puertas Lleras (Meta).

**Choco.** Yet another major struggle is occurring in Choco, where the Gulf Clan (AGC), led by “Chiquito Malo,” is fighting and largely prevailing against the ELN Western War Front, now struggling to hold onto San Juan, in the southern part of the Department. The AGC has its stronghold in the neighboring Department of Antioquia (and were once called “Urabeños” for their origins in the Urabá region of that Department). The AGC are also being helped in their campaign against the ELN in San Juan by a temporary alliance with the EMC, which is threatening the ELN from the Valle de Cauca to the south. Some 3,500 people have been displaced from their homes by violence associated with that struggle. The Colombian Army recently deployed 3,600 troops.

As it consolidates its control over Choco, the AGC is also looking to expand in neighboring Cordoba, the south of Bolivar state, and elsewhere, and may also confront the EMC after it finishes with the ELN in San Juan.

**Cauca.** In Cauca, the fight between groups focuses on control over strategic terrain, with the region serving as a point of access between the Pacific and the interior of the country, as well as

into the Amazon basin of Brazil and ultimately Europe, through the Putumayo River. The principal struggle there is between the ELN (principally the [Jose Maria Becerra](#) front), and FARC EMC, although in Cauca, the EMC forces of Ivan Mordisco are also struggling against a splinter faction of its own, the “Yair Bermúdez 57th FARC Front, based in [rural areas of the southern Cauca](#) valley, but which is trying to extend its influence over strategic valley passages in the north.

In March 2025, the EMC captured national headlines when it ambushed and [temporarily captured 29 Colombian soldiers](#) in the region.

Gulf clan elements (AGC) and parts of the Second Marquetalia are also reportedly present in the region.

***Nariño and Putumayo.*** In the south of Colombia, in the departments of Nariño and Putumayo, bordering Ecuador, the strategic value of the territory for criminal groups is defined by access to the Pacific, both through Colombia and Ecuador for exporting cocaine via the Pacific, access to the interior for growing coca, making cocaine, and exporting it via the Putumayo river through the Amazon and to Europe via the Atlantic.

The key armed criminal actors operating in the area are the [Border Command](#) (a spinoff of the 48th FARC warfront) and the [Carolina Ramirez front](#). It was the Border Command, operating across the border in Ecuador, which in May 2025, [ambushed an Ecuadoran patrol, killing 11](#), prompting deployment of [significant additional Ecuadoran forces to the region](#).

In Nariño, which touches on both Ecuador and the Colombian Pacific, and which includes the [dangerous port city of Tumaco](#), groups involved in the struggles over territory and illicit activities include the ELN, the [ELN splinter “Comuneros del Sur”](#) (which recently [entered demobilization talks](#) with the Petro government), 2nd Marquetalia, and EMC. Sometimes, cartels conducting operations in the area actually enter through Ecuador, conduct their business in Nariño, and leave again via Ecuador. Nariño is also the part of Colombia’s Pacific coast where the [greatest number of narcosubmarines and low observable vessels](#) for drug transits have been detected.

Beyond the conflicts in individual geographies, as in other parts of the region, the use of adapted commercial drones armed groups such as the Gulf Clan by to perform both surveillance and attack missions, particularly drones from the Chinese companies DJI and Mavic, is an increasing problem. A Colombian soldier was [killed by an ELN drone](#) during operations in Catatumbo.

In addition to armed groups fighting over drug routes and mining, drugs, Colombia's socioeconomic fabric continues to be strained by the more than [three million Venezuelans](#) who have immigrated to the country as a product of political persecution and the lack of economic opportunity in neighboring Venezuela. In addition to the strain placed by such migration on Colombia's education, health, and other social services, the migrants have been accompanied by [Tren de Aragua](#) and other Venezuelan gangs, preying on the desperation of the migrants, exploiting them through prostitution and other illicit activities, and using violence against rival groups and Colombian communities to establish and defend their criminal territory.

## **Colombia's Security Capabilities and Response**

As noted previously, the ability of Colombia's security forces to respond to the present challenge has been severely limited by policy, institutional, and resource factors. Nonetheless, Colombia's security forces continue to be among the most capable, innovative and professional in the region, and are working to adapt to the challenge, and bring on new capabilities, with the help of the United States and other partners.

As noted previously, Petro, through his peace negotiator and former M-19 guerilla [Otty Patino](#), is currently engaged in talks with nine of Colombia's major armed groups, as well as seeking dialogues with urban gangs.

Despite Colombia's grave security situation and the limited resources of its military and police organizations, Petro's first defense minister, Ivan Velasquez, responded to a call from the President

to each of the nation's ministries to cut spending, by returning 800 billion pesos (about \$200 million) budgeted for defense needs.

Despite the discomfort of many Colombian security officials with Velasquez, Colombia's current Defense Minister, [retired Brigadier General Pedro Sanchez](#), a helicopter pilot with over 6,600 hours, is widely respected among the persons with whom I spoke. He is seen as a capable military leader, including having [headed the Joint Special Operations Command \(CCOE\)](#), and later, commanding the Colombian Air Force.

Due to a combination of resource and other constraints, air mobility, once solved by a massive infusion of U.S. helicopters, is again becoming a significant problem. Of Colombia's 20 aging Russian Mi-17s, sanctions due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have [inhibited depot-level and other maintenance](#) of the helicopters, with the consequence that only three or four are still available to fly.

A lack of resources for maintenance has also impacted the operational availability of Colombia's U.S. UH-1 "Iroquois" helicopters. Of an estimated 64 such helicopters received from the U.S. only approximately 15-19 are reportedly in operation. This has reportedly obliged some Colombian units to use expensive and sophisticated H-60 "Blackhawk" helicopters for transport operations, consuming their useful service lives and generating future problems.

Resources have also significantly degraded Colombian Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, currently operating at approximately 30-40% of the capability just a few years prior, according to one Colombian security expert interviewed for this work. The degradation includes decreased availability of their aerial assets due to reduced budgets for maintenance and fuel, compounded by the loss of support from U.S. assets provided during the prior Plan Colombia period. The Colombian Air Force continues to have mid-sized "Scan Eagle" UAVs [previously provided by the U.S.](#) for surveillance, but lacks the support from the large, long-endurance MQ-9 "Global Hawk" UAVs it once also received from the U.S.

Colombia has also suffered a significant degradation of its cyber, as well as other capabilities, with the loss of support once provided by Israel, following [Petro's May 2024 decision to break relations](#) with its government over the conflict in Gaza.

Despite the grave challenges, in 2025, the level of homicides fell modestly to 25.4 per 100,000, [down 1.9% from the prior year](#).

## Political Paralysis Impeding the State Response

Colombia's deteriorating security situation is compounded by political paralysis. President Petro's legislative agenda is effectively frozen and the President has turned into a stimulator of social protest, rather than a leader of action in his own country.

When the President's labor reform proposal failed to pass in Congress, he sought a [costly national referendum](#) on the question. When that also failed to pass, he [called for nationwide protests](#), and ordered the police and military not to challenge the protesters. The order raised concern that Petro was effectively inciting action that could lead to economic disruptions and damage to property, while impeding authorities [from their duty to protect](#) Colombians from such damages.

Legislative paralysis has been compounded by chaos in the President's own cabinet. In February 2025, a misguided decision by the President to broadcast cabinet meetings, led to session in which several of his ministers [publicly disagreed with him and fought each other](#), precipitating the President to [call for the resignation of cabinet members](#), with the shake-up still not fully resolved. Among other changes, when Petro reappointed his cabinet chief, Sergio Benedetti, who has been involved in a range of scandals from [cocaine consumption captured on camera](#), to accusations of [domestic violence](#), to the post of [interior minister](#), it deepened dissent within his cabinet and public speculation that Benedetti has material to blackmail the President on matters of grave importance.

Further complicating matters, in May 2025, the heads of both houses of Colombia's parliament were [arrested for accepting bribes](#) from government officials in exchange for their support of the President's legislative agenda, a longstanding corrupt practice in the country referred to as the "marmelada." In the present scandal, the bribes appear to have been channeled through Colombia's disaster response agency, UNGRD. A number of the officials involved appear to now be cooperating with authorities, creating the likelihood that charges could be brought against a large number of Congresspersons and other officials who were participating, and possibly even President Petro.

For President Petro, the scandal compounds the effect of multiple others which have undercut his support within the public, including an investigation into accepting money [from narcotraffickers through his son Nicholas](#) to support his presidential election. The President's alleged abuse of alcohol and illicit drugs has also become a matter of public discussion, with [three damning formal accusations](#) by his former foreign minister and peace negotiator Alvaro Levy, who characterized

the President of being so incapacitated from drug use during a state trip to Paris, that his functionaries were forced to cancel scheduled meetings with foreign leaders for two days.

Despite such difficulties, President Petro has maintained a core of [approximately 30% support in the polls](#). Many of the Colombians with whom I spoke anticipate a year of “muddling through” on both the security and political front until May 2026 national elections, with the hope of avoiding “decertification” by the U.S., or increased tariffs and economic sanctions that could precipitate the further deepening of the country’s security and economic crises. At present, the field is wide open, with numerous possibilities, from right-oriented candidates such as [Vicky Davila](#), [Maria Fernanda Cabral](#), [Miguel Uribe](#), and Alvaro Uribe. On the extreme right they include the well known national journalist. Candidates in the middle include respected Antioquia governor and Medellin mayor Sergio Fajardo and Juan Manuel Galan. On the left, major candidates include former Petro minister [Gustavo Bolivar](#), [Maria Jose Pizarro](#), [Daniel Quintero](#), and [Ivan Cepeda](#).

Many with whom I spoke indicated that Colombia greatly needs a responsible, decent, technically competent candidate, but may not be in the political mood to elect one.

## Conclusion

The concerns raised by Colombia’s deepening security and political crises go beyond the tragedy they present to the Colombian people. Colombian cocaine and illicit drugs supply both U.S. and European markets. It is strategically located, straddling both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, influencing the Caribbean basin, and connecting South America to the Central American isthmus. That location has made it key for influencing the flow of refugees from Venezuela, Ecuador and the Caribbean through the Darien Gap to the United States, as well as for the protection of (or potential threats to) the Panama Canal. Such strategic considerations contributed to the significant U.S. investment in combatting drugs and other threats to its stability under Plan Colombia. It continues to be a vital motivation for the U.S. not to allow those considerable Colombian triumphs to be reversed today.

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