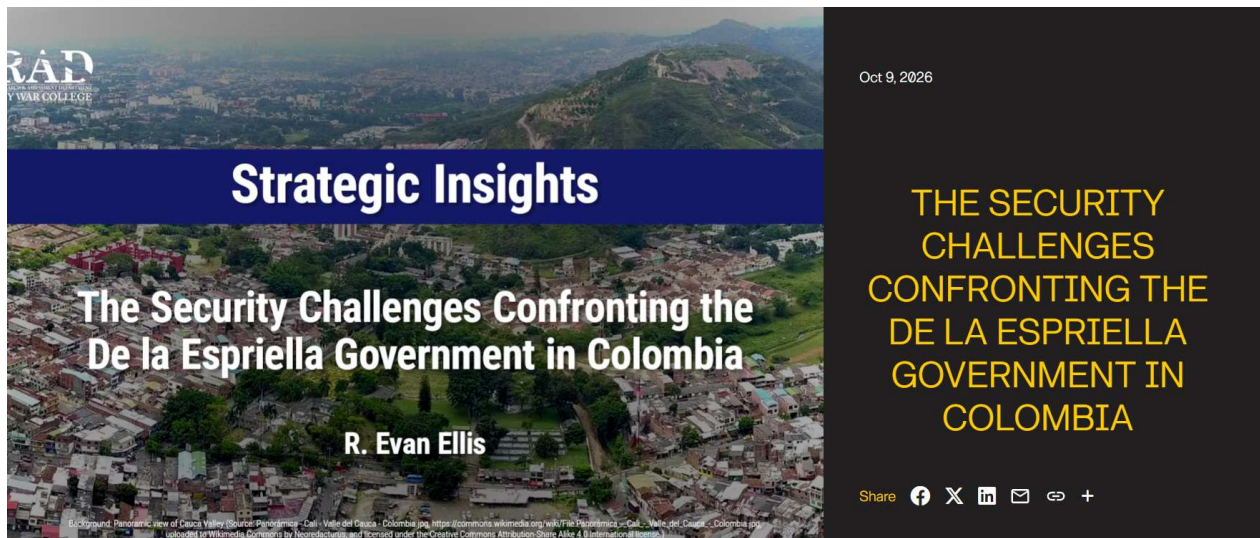




Introduction

Abelardo de la Espriella's new government in Colombia has dramatically departed from the policy orientation of his predecessor, Gustavo Petro. He has shifted from the latter's [“total peace” approach](#) of seeking negotiations with Colombia's armed criminal groups and a [permissive orientation toward coca growing](#), to an [aggressive](#), military-supported campaign against criminal and terrorist groups, as well as forced eradication of coca crops, including the announced attempt to [resume aerial spraying](#).

De la Espriella has moved sharply away from Petro's [public reproaches](#) of the Trump administration's counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and migration policies, toward integrating Colombia into the US-led “[Shield of the Americas](#)” and the associated “[Americas Counter-Cartel Coalition](#)” (A3C). In the process, his government has opened new possibilities for US-Colombia security cooperation against armed groups and secured a Trump administration pledge of up to [\\$1 billion in assistance](#) to that end.

In many ways, De la Espriella's shift resembles the move from the efforts of Colombia's former president, Andrés Pastrana, from 1998 to 2002, to [negotiate with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#) (FARC), to the military-led whole-of-government effort of his successor, President Álvaro Uribe, to [reassert control by the Colombian state](#) over its national territory. However, the challenge facing the De la Espriella government today is, in some ways, different from the one Uribe faced. He faces a more challenging international environment and must rely on Colombian security forces whose capabilities atrophied significantly under his predecessor's government.

The Colombian government can again bring order to the landscape of armed groups and criminal economies that have spread across the country since the November [2016 accords](#)

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with the FARC, with challenges compounded by the pressures of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and Petro's "total peace" approach. That path to stabilizing Colombia in its current crisis, however, will be fraught with the risks of expanded violence and fragmentation, domestic polarization, paralyzing legal fights, and struggles to secure needed international cooperation. This article examines the security challenges facing the De la Espriella government, its collaboration with the United States and other partners, and recommendations for an effective response.

Colombia's Security Challenges

The deterioration of the security situation in Colombia arguably began with [the 2016 accords](#) with the FARC. The accords themselves created [dissatisfaction in people with many different political orientations](#). Some, generally on the right, were displeased with [payments](#) to demobilizing FARC members and temporarily giving the unelected [political successor organization](#) to the group [seats in the Colombian Congress](#). Others, generally on the left, were unhappy that the Colombian state failed to deliver on its [promises of land reform](#) and infrastructure investment at the expected pace. Many were dissatisfied with the [transitional justice mechanism](#), some for its perceived prosecution against military officers and leniency toward the FARC, others for the opposite.

Beyond these controversies, although the accords made an important contribution in bringing [13,000 fighters into](#) the demobilization process, the benefits were neither complete nor permanent. Even before implementation, some FARC members transferred into the once-smaller National Liberation Army (ELN), rapidly increasing its power and allowing it to move into territory vacated by the FARC. Other FARC organizations, including the First Front, which was deeply involved in criminal activities in areas like Guaviare, refused to demobilize and continued their military operations and associated criminal activities. Following the implementation of the accords, some historic FARC leaders who had taken the accords' benefits and demobilized, most prominently [Iván Márquez and Jesús Santrich](#), attempted to continue their criminal activities, coming into conflict with the state until they eventually renounced the agreements and returned to the fight under the [name Segunda Marquetalia](#).

Below the level of such elites, as occurred with the members of self-defense groups a decade before, many demobilized FARC members failed to find sufficient opportunity in the legitimate economy, and they turned back to how they knew to make a living—the use of arms—[joining criminal groups](#) like the "Urabeños" (later renamed the "Gulf Clan"). The aggregate effect was a redistribution of fighters among groups and an expansion of violence, accompanied by fragmentation and uncertainty.

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Even as Colombian criminal groups reorganized without an enduring reduction in their ranks following demobilization, the COVID-19 pandemic [greatly limited](#) state presence and opportunities in the legitimate economy. Then, in the face of those limited opportunities and a reduced state security presence, the incoming Colombian administration of Gustavo Petro replaced confrontation with armed groups with a new “total-peace” approach. The new policy created a patchwork of temporary agreements and restrictions on the employment of the Colombian Armed Forces allowing the groups, already expanding in number and violently competing for territory, to consolidate their control and expand more rapidly.

The US State Department estimated that there were approximately 12,000 armed fighters in Colombia in 2015, including [7,000 FARC](#), [2,000 ELN](#), and [2,400 Urabeños](#). By 2025, the *Fundación Ideas para la Paz* estimated the number of combatants to be [approximately the same](#). The number of municipalities that reported the presence of at least one armed group in Colombia exploded from 195 in 2019 to [more than 410 in 2025](#).

Part of the evolution in criminal groups in Colombia at this time was a function of their funding, including a surge in revenues from cocaine production and illegal mining.

In the domain of narcotrafficking, the 2016 accords generated incentives for campesinos [to maximize hectares of coca under cultivation](#), hoping to be compensated for subsequently ceasing coca production on those lands. The Colombian state’s fight against coca production was further complicated by a [2015 court ruling](#) ending aerial spraying and, later, by the logistical demands of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Colombian army, which partly diverted it from labor-intensive [manual coca eradication](#) and the territorial control it required.

Coca growing, already expanding, exploded under the Petro administration, which [effectively reduced forced](#) eradication and associated actions against campesinos growing coca. According to the United Nations Office of Drug Control (UNODC), the amount of coca under cultivation in Colombia expanded from [96,000 hectares in 2015](#) to [261,000 hectares by 2024](#). That growth, in combination with [higher yields](#) achieved through genetic improvements and closer planting, generated an explosion in revenue for the armed groups, transforming that coca into cocaine and [shipping it to Europe](#) and the United States. One authoritative study estimated that revenues from cocaine to Colombia-based criminal groups increased by 5.5 times from 2014 to 2024, to [\\$16.5 billion per year](#).

Alongside cocaine revenues, armed groups’ revenues from illegal mining in Colombia also spiked during this period. This phenomenon reflected the previously noted [reduction in state control](#) over national territory vis-à-vis armed groups, increased criminal mining in

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neighboring Venezuela, and a dramatic [increase in global gold prices](#). Illicit mining income, estimated to be [\\$2 billion to \\$3 billion](#) per year in 2015, reached an estimated [\\$8.4 billion](#) per year by 2025.

Further adding to Colombia's growing criminal economy, the displacement of [2.8 million Venezuelans](#) into Colombia, plus [millions more who passed through](#) the country to other destinations, created opportunities for illicit revenues from [smuggling, prostitution, extortion, and robbery](#) by groups such as Tren de Aragua that preyed on them.

Reflecting the combination of all of these dynamics, the Colombian countryside, as well as urban areas, became more violent as those groups competed against each other for control of criminal economies, from cocaine and gold to kidnapping. According to Colombia's Defense Ministry, extortion related to kidnappings [almost tripled](#) from 2015 to 2025, reported [thefts almost doubled](#), and homicides [increased 11 percent](#) during the period.

Colombia | Homicides by department

January–December 2025 · Preliminary counts
Absolute totals · 32 departments and Bogotá, D.C.

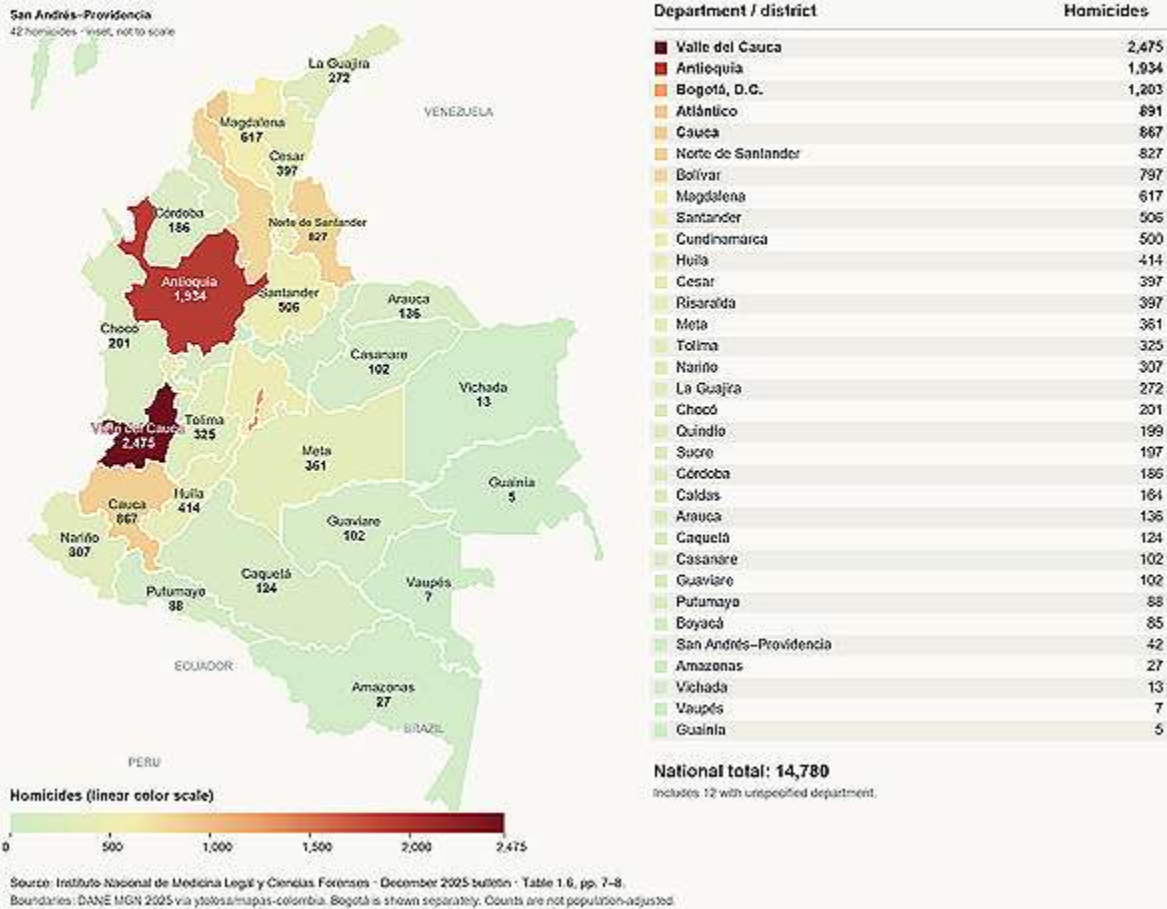


Figure 1. Homicides by department

(Source: Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses)

By the end of the Petro administration, Colombia's most violent departments could be understood as separate, though interrelated, wars for territory and associated criminal revenue among competing armed groups. In Guaviare, Colombia's most violent department, with 120 murders per 100,000 people, an estimated [85 percent of homicides were tied to the fight between the Amazonas block](#) of FARC dissidents tied to Iván Mordisco, and the Cordoba dissidents of the Calacara block, known as the Joint Staff of Blocks and Fronts.

In San Andrés, with 66 murders per 100,000 population, the principal fight is between the [Los Pusey faction](#) of the Gulf Clan (AGC) and the group La Fortaleza over trafficking routes and local drug markets on San Andrés Island.

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In Cauca, with 54 murders per 100,000, the [principal fight is between](#) groups tied to Iván Mordisco’s “Joint Chiefs of Staff” (EMC) FARC dissident organization, particularly the Carlos Patino and other Western fronts, the ELN, and the National Coordinator of the Bolivarian Army (CNEB), a group emerging from the splintering of the previously noted Segunda Marquetalia.

In Valle del Cauca, where the homicide rate is 53 per 100,000, the [fight is between](#) other EMC dissidents, including the Jaime Martinez front, the ELN, and elements of the Gulf Clan. There is also a separate, if related, conflict [between the Shottas and Espartano](#) gangs.

In Arauca, with 49 murders per 100,000 people, the [principal fight is between](#) other EMC dissidents from the 10th and 28th fronts and the Eastern Front of the ELN, particularly its Domingo Lain front.

The Atrophy of the Colombian Security Apparatus

As the threat of armed criminal groups expanded during the government of Gustavo Petro, fueled by an exploding illicit economy and fights between groups over criminal territory and revenue, his administration effectively [impaired](#) and [disincentivized](#) the nation’s security forces from aggressively acting against the threat, [restricted the resources they badly needed](#) to carry out their mission, and restricted important types of cooperation with traditional partners such as the United States and Israel.

As noted previously, Colombia’s military began the Petro administration at a disadvantage, with the required emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic [undercutting military readiness](#) for other operations.

Petro also set the tone for his administration by retiring an unprecedented [52 top generals](#) to make way for the military leadership he preferred. The loss of so many top leaders, whose experience had been built over long careers of command, weakened capabilities at the highest levels, as [less experienced officers](#) were promoted to fill the vacated positions.

Such choices by Petro, in combination with new policies to reduce the risk of collateral damage from military action, such as forbidding aerial bombing of the armed groups’ camps if it could not be proven that [minors were not present](#), sent a strong message that the new government [penalized mistakes and rewarded caution](#) over taking risks to achieve results.

Petro’s choice of Iván Velásquez as defense minister, a lawyer and former Supreme Court of Justice of Colombia who had built his career [investigating the military for human rights violations](#), reinforced that message and strongly [disincentivized commanders](#) from taking

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initiative on the battlefield. When Velásquez resigned [in February 2025](#), Petro's choice of [Pedro Sánchez Suárez](#), a leader with more than 35 years of military experience, to replace him was seen by many of the Colombian military colleagues I consulted off the record as a significant improvement. Sánchez arguably did his best as commander in chief within the constraints of Petro's policies.

The impediments to the effectiveness of Colombia's security forces stemming from leadership changes and restrictive policies were compounded by the Petro administration's proclamation or negotiation of a myriad of truces and ceasefires, often in overlapping territories, that significantly limited where Colombia's security forces could operate and against whom they could operate. Upon assuming office in August 2022, the Petro government announced [five ceasefires](#) involving the [ELN](#), the [Gulf Clan](#), the “[Joint Chiefs of Staff](#)” of the dissident FARC groups (EMC), the [Segunda Marquetalia](#), and the [Sierra Nevada Self Defense Groups](#) (ASCN). During 2023, the Petro government negotiated additional truces with successors of the ELN and Segunda Marquetalia as those [groups splintered](#). Beyond these, during 2023 and early 2024, it announced eight extensions of ceasefires or new agreements covering the [ELN](#), [EMC](#), the [Joint Chiefs of Blocks and Fronts](#) (EMBF—formerly the Calacará), the [Segunda Marquetalia](#), the [Coordinator of the National Bolivarian Army](#) (CNEB), the [Southern Communes](#), and the [Gulf Clan](#). It also announced four agreements with urban criminal organizations, including the [Shottas and Espartanos](#) of Buenaventura; the [Mexicanos, Locos Yam, RPS, Los Z, and Revolución Cabí](#) of Quibdó; various criminal groups in [Medellín and the Aburrá Valley](#); and the [Pepes and Costeños](#) of Barranquilla, among others.

Finally, as noted previously, amid these other impediments to the effectiveness of Colombia's security forces in confronting the nation's growing security crisis, the Petro administration deeply cut and blocked funding disbursements to those institutions, with increasingly grave effects on the readiness of equipment and personnel. Petro's cuts included slashing 606 billion pesos [from the armed forces and police in 2024](#). In January 2025, he issued [Decree 0069](#), freezing the use of already appropriated funds for the armed services to acquire needed goods.

The publicly reported consequences of such cuts during Petro's presidency are anecdotal, yet grave. In July 2024, the head of Colombia's army aviation organization reported that only [92 of his 138 aircraft were operational](#). In 2025, the Colombian navy similarly reported having funds to meet only 59 percent of its maintenance needs, [and acknowledged negative effects](#) from the shortfall. A [September 2026 report](#) by Colombia's Ideas for Peace Foundation details the devastating deterioration of readiness that occurred across the force, including 56 percent of military aircraft out of service, 48 percent of naval and

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riverine watercraft nonoperational, and budget gaps between operational needs and funding provided: 96 percent for army artillery, 93 percent for army transport, and 78 percent for army cavalry.

Colombia's New Path Forward

The De la Espriella government's response to Colombia's security challenges and institutional deterioration since taking office has been promising, though it is too early to assess the effectiveness of its new direction.

De la Espriella's choice of Major General [Jorge Mora Lopez](#) as defense minister is well regarded for his extensive military command experience in [special forces](#), counternarcotics operations, and strategic defense planning.

Within a month of assuming office, De la Espriella ended virtually all peace negotiation processes created by his predecessor through nine resolutions and launched a series of major operations against armed groups. His new military initiatives included a major air operation [against the ELN in Catatumbo](#)—just three days after taking office. They also included [Operation Amón](#), a bombardment of the Jorge Suárez bloc's camps in the Calarcá group in Guaviare; Operation Azarías, against the Carolina Ramírez front in the same department; and the creation of Joint Task Force Urano, with 1,200 members from across the armed services, to target hydrocarbon theft.

The De la Espriella government also declared it would [resume aerial spraying](#) against coca production and expand other forms of forced eradication. Colombia has already announced [a pilot program](#) in the Department of Putumayo, using a different herbicide than in previous efforts, glufosinate-ammonium, though the effort has been legally contested.

De la Espriella has also reinvigorated US-Colombia security cooperation, including intelligence sharing and the possibility of joint operations. He and his team have reportedly coordinated with US political and military leaders since his election and were thus positioned to move quickly once he took office. Indeed, just five days after De la Espriella's inauguration, US Secretary of War Hegseth announced that Colombia had [authorized joint military operations](#). Then, less than two weeks later, US Southern Command Commander General Francis L. Donovan met with De la Espriella and Colombian military counterparts to advance cooperation.

On September 8, 2026, in a meeting with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, De la Espriella announced “[Plan Patriot for the 21st Century](#),” suggesting that the [\\$1 billion in security cooperation](#) committed by the United States could include [support to modernize](#)

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Colombian aircraft, helicopters, radar, drones, counter-drone systems, air defense, intelligence, cyber defense, special forces, and maintenance systems.

Beyond strictly military cooperation, the De la Espriella government also resumed extraditions to the United States, which his predecessor had suspended, [sending 94 persons](#) there during his first month in office.

Risks and Challenges

De la Espriella's security initiatives, with strong support from the US government, are arguably moving in a very positive direction, but they also raise important risks that should be recognized and managed.

First, in the short term, Colombia's stepped-up efforts against armed groups may expand violence, both by ending peace negotiations and by fragmenting armed groups through operations targeting them and their leaders. Examples of such consequences from other conflicts include the violence produced when the [Felipe Calderon government in Mexico stepped up actions](#) against drug cartels in that country. Indeed, Colombian initiatives pursued to date have already spawned violent consequences, including drone attacks by the ELN and other reprisals and secondary effects. As examples, the September 21, 2026, operation in Santa Marta that killed José Luis Pérez Villanueva ("Cholo"), the second-ranking commander of the ASCN, led to a [series of retaliatory actions](#) by the group in the area, including an "armed shutdown" with the group [setting fire to various vehicles](#). A September 4 ELN [attack involving explosive drones](#) in Ocaña, Norte de Santander, is believed to be [linked to government operations](#) there. In the Department of Bolivar, the September 24 capture by the Colombian army [of the ELN leader Isais](#) arguably contributed to the September 2 fighting between the ELN and the Gulf Clan in Montecristo, in the south of the department, in which [explosive drones were used](#). These consequences do not mean Colombia's government should avoid confronting armed groups operating in the country but rather should prepare for the military and political consequences of those actions.

Beyond such military and political reactions, the Colombian government's initiatives are also likely to generate pushback from Colombia's strong legal system, as De la Espriella has [publicly acknowledged](#). Indeed, the August 27, 2026, strike against ELN camps in Guaviare [spawned a lawsuit](#) over the allegation that the Colombian military had reasonable evidence that minors were present in the camp. On September 11, a judge in Puerto Asis [halted the aerial-spraying pilot](#) project over alleged health risks.

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Beyond legal action, human rights groups, including [Amnesty International](#) and [Save the Children](#), have spoken out against De la Espriella's military approach. The president's often confrontational style [may compound the effects](#) of his actions by deepening polarization in Colombia's already divided society, giving opportunities to those on the left who seek to paralyze De la Espriella's government through legislative action or bring it down.

Venezuela's evolving situation will also [weigh heavily on Colombia's success](#). Groups such as the ELN and FARC dissidents obtain [substantial revenue](#) from illegal mining and other criminal operations in Venezuela. A substantial number of ELN, FARC, and other groups continue to have refuge and resources on the Venezuelan side of the border, allowing them to sustain criminal and terrorist activities in Colombia. That reality [has not been substantially changed](#) with the US removal of Nicolás Maduro and engagement with his successor, Delcy Rodríguez.

Beyond the importance of cross-border collaboration with Venezuela on criminal groups and illicit flows, restoring legitimate democratic government and economic stability in Venezuela would [substantially benefit](#) Colombia's economic and security situation, including facilitating the possible return of some of the [2.8 million Venezuelans](#) living in the country. Alternatively, destabilizing the transitional Rodríguez regime could increase pressure on Colombia from migration and cross-border criminal activity.

Beyond Venezuela, Colombia today faces a different, arguably more complex strategic environment than it did two decades ago, when Uribe's government successfully reasserted control over its national territory. Although Uribe had to deal with a range of armed "self-defense" and [other criminal groups](#), the landscape of such groups today is arguably much more complex and arrayed against the government. Uribe's government also did not have to contend with [armed drones](#), cyberattacks, cryptocurrencies, artificial intelligence [in the hands of criminal groups](#), or distant wars in the Middle East that threatened to keep petroleum prices extraordinarily high and [destabilize Colombia's economy](#) and the [rest of the global economy](#).

Finally, the success of De la Espriella's initiatives will arguably depend on the effectiveness of interagency and international coordination, and on attention to detail in implementing those policies. While the De la Espriella government's active confrontation of criminal groups is far better than the accommodation and haphazard policies of his predecessor, examples from [Mexico to Honduras to Ecuador today](#) show that confronting criminal groups can bring order, but not always. The achievements of the prior [Colombian government of Uribe](#) in reasserting the Colombian state's control over national territory were arguably a product of his sustained [attention to detail](#) in interagency and international cooperation. De la Espriella will require no less to succeed.

Recommendations

Within the framework of the Shield of the Americas and the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition, the United States has an important opportunity to help the De la EsPriella government reassert control over Colombian national territory. To do so, it must pay attention to differences in Colombia's national circumstances, international environment, and political leadership today compared with those of the Uribe era. It must not assume that a "replay" of Plan Colombia, itself misunderstood and incomplete in its success, will yield similar results.

Then, as now, it will be important for the United States to work closely and flexibly with Colombia to understand its institutional needs, capabilities, limitations, and idiosyncrasies, and to ensure that US assistance meets Colombia's needs for long-term success while also helping a willing De la EsPriella government address US priorities in the fight against organized criminal groups.

Colombia's government and people have consistently shown they are capable, resourceful, and tenacious. With effective public policies and a qualified government, Colombia can once again turn tragedy into triumph. It will require hard work, coordination, and patience. For Colombia and the region, however, the consequence of failure is unacceptable.

Keywords: Colombia, De la EsPriella, security, cocaine, FARC

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