

Winning Peace and Exporting Stability: Colombia as NATO's next Global Partner?

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Is Colombia going to be NATO's next global partner? In June 2013, the question was already worthy of attention, when Colombia and NATO entered into an "Agreement on the Security of Information" that was signed between then-NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow and Colombia's Defence Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón. While the deal encompassed not much more than sharing intelligence in areas of common concern, the agreement surely was "a first step for future cooperation in the security field" and Ambassador Vershbow remarked that "Colombia's expertise in enhancing integrity in the military is precisely the kind of substantive contribution that exemplifies the added value of cooperation."²

The question seems more immediate today, as Colombia has entered a new era, with the beginning of the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo – FARC-EP*), once the largest and oldest insurgency in Latin America, and the start of negotiations with other rebel groups.

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² "NATO and Colombia Open Channel for Future Cooperation," *NATO*, 25 June 2013, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_101634.htm



Even after a succession of suspenseful developments at the end of 2016, which at one time clouded Colombia's future with uncertainty – especially after the failed referendum on 2 October 2016 which threatened to overturn the government's peace agreement with FARC – peace seems to be already won and the country looks ready to address new challenges.³ However, isn't it too soon to think about a NATO partnership, a question on which there is no sense of urgency? Why focus on a partnership with NATO? The implementation of a solid peace process is still the priority of the Colombian authorities. The public hopes for a final end to a bloody 52-year-long conflict that killed over 220,000 people and displaced 7 million more. In a way, the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Juan Manuel Santos already answered this question: it could be analyzed as a tribute to a country and a president – and all the parties – that “have not given up hope of a just peace,” and it seems that the actors involved in the peace process continue to be committed to peace and security.⁴ A partnership with NATO would therefore serve as a way to acknowledge, encourage and empower those who would like Colombia to move beyond its legacy of internal conflict to become a firm actor in international security.

This also means that Colombia is up for new challenges, and maybe NATO could benefit from a closer partnership. Surely, from a purely geographic standpoint, South America seems far removed from the Alliance's core perspective. The Warsaw Summit Communiqué of July 2016 does not even mention

the continent, which is perhaps understandable as the Alliance deals with a more volatile and fragile environment in its immediate neighbourhood. However, the document recognizes the role of partners and the necessity to continue engaging with countries, opening dialogue and finding innovative ways to cooperate and work together. In fact, it has become part of NATO's DNA to develop cooperation with other countries willing to share their knowledge in areas of mutual interest – and to support NATO's operations.⁵ The idea of mutual benefit and reciprocity cannot be discarded for Colombia, as previous agreements recognize.

Building closer relations with NATO could also bolster Colombia's efforts to take on more responsibilities in peace operations abroad. In return, Colombia has a lot to bring to the Alliance. The way in which Colombia ended a civil war, ensuring national reconciliation and discussing transitional justice, offers an important case study. In addition, the role of a domestic-led comprehensive approach to weaken an insurgency, with (important yet limited) US support, provides food for thought in helping failed or weak states to efficiently recover after a conflict, a lesson that NATO learned the hard way in Afghanistan and for which it is still under criticism in Libya. Finally, irrespective of its domestic priorities, Colombia has a limited but long history of contributing to international stability operations, from the Korean War to various United Nations missions in the Middle East, Africa and the Caribbean; and the Colombian authorities have

³ On 2 October 2016, Colombian voters rejected through a referendum the first draft of the peace agreement between the FARC and the government. As the results were very close (the “no” won with 50,2% of votes, and with less than 38% of the electorate casting a vote) another round of negotiations went on. This time, the parties agreed on a slightly modified agreement which was finally approved by the Colombian Parliament on December 1, 2016. For a better understanding of the referendum and its whereabouts, see Arthur Lupia, *Why did a new Colombian peace agreement come so quickly after the referendum ‘no’ vote?*, *The Conversation*, 5 December 2016 (<http://theconversation.com/why-did-a-new-colombian-peace-agreement-come-so-quickly-after-the-referendum-no-vote-69749>)

⁴ Nobel Prize 2016 Press Release, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2016/press.html

⁵ NATO, *Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 2010, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120203_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf



already offered a greater commitment of troops to UN-led operations that could conceivably be extended to NATO-led operations. Perceivable advantages are obvious as Colombia has gained a lot of counterinsurgency experience during the past two decades, winning respect for its forces in the Americas and beyond.⁶

While a partnership between NATO and Colombia faces challenges, from vocal opposition in South America to Alliance members aiming to concentrate on territorial defence, it would be shortsighted to neglect exploring the mutual benefits of a partnership promising strategic and operational value for both parties. The time might be ripe for NATO to turn an eye towards South America, especially when geopolitical considerations are calling for it. Not only could a partnership with Colombia extend NATO's global reach, by including a Pan-American bridge between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in the Alliance's network of partners, it could also be of critical importance at a time when Russia is expanding its influence in the region. As close allies of the Kremlin, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua have been allowing Moscow to engage in the region militarily, from arms sales to the presence of forces as part of military exercises. Without falling back into a Cold War mindset and promoting NATO military presence in Latin America, it should be in the interest of the Alliance to support Western-minded nations in their balancing act against states whose relations with Russia are linked to the Kremlin's global ambitions to expand its sphere of influence.

Colombia, a small but dedicated international actor?

It is little known that Colombia, in the early 1950s, was already active on the international stage. For instance, Colombia was the only Latin American country to take part in the Korean War (1950-1953), under a UN mandate, in a direct military role. Despite a strong domestic crisis at home (known as the *Violencia*), the dispatch of military forces to Korea was a powerful political marker to demonstrate Colombia's commitment to the UN's collective security agreement. The expertise gained in Korea in fighting a communist military was also helpful in elevating the proficiency and professionalization of the Colombian military, which soon became critical as left-wing insurgencies and guerrillas were establishing themselves in remote parts of the country. Colombia continued this commitment to peace support operations, being a major contributor to one of the first UN peacekeeping missions to the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula, as part of the UN Emergency Force (UNEF I, 1956–67). It resumed in 1982, when Bogotá sent troops to the Sinai Peninsula under the Multinational Force of Observers (MFO) – a mission that is still ongoing.⁷

While curbing insurgencies and making substantial progress in the war on drugs, Colombia has become, over the past decades, a producer of security and a true regional security provider, as its contribution to the Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) prove. During the 1990s, Colombia also contributed military observers to various mis-

⁶ For example, many former Colombian soldiers are recruited by numerous international private military companies and the Colombian forces won the annual "Fuerzas Comando," a Latin American special operations competition sponsored by the US Southern Command, in seven of the past eleven years.

⁷ Currently, Colombia is the second largest contributor to the MFO – after the US – with over 350 personnel deployed, <http://mfo.org/en/contingents>



sions and operations in Central America and the Caribbean, as well as in Angola and Cambodia. Even if assessed as “modest,” when compared to its Latin American neighbours,⁸ Colombia has decided to be more visible as a contributor to peace operations and has established itself as an exporter of security by sending over 2,400 police and military personnel to train forces in sixty nations, mostly with the support of the US.⁹ The Colombian government also concluded a Framework Participation Agreement with the European Union, providing the legal basis to govern and facilitate the participation of Colombian forces in EU-led civilian and military crisis management operations.¹⁰ Moreover, in 2015, a framework agreement was signed with the UN for Colombia’s Armed Forces’ contribution to UN peacekeeping operations, further recognizing the legitimacy of the Colombian Armed forces “as an institution committed to the application of the rules of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in all its operations” and their peacebuilding ability.¹¹

This track record underlines that the Colombian government – despite a five-decade-long conflict – has never wavered from its international obligations and commitment, strengthening its credibility and accountability. This highlights the particularity of Colombia among its Latin American peers and in its regional context; one of the few South American countries not to have experienced a military dictatorship (with the sole exception of the *years* 1953-

1957), Colombia feels second to none, which is reflected in every part of its foreign policy.

For instance, at the regional level, while many IR researchers value Brazil as a benevolent hegemon, Colombia follows a soft-balancing policy: constraining Brasília from further emerging as South America’s centre of power and making it recognize secondary powers’ demands by applying non-coercive, non-military means, such as alliance building and entangling diplomacy.¹²

Colombia – from an (almost) failed state to a rejuvenated democracy, 1998-2016

Colombia’s new rise and place on the continental chessboard cannot be understood without mentioning what was its main challenge for 52 years. During that period, Colombians experienced one of the most violent and protracted conflicts in the international arena, where state and non-state actors, insurgents and right-wing paramilitary organizations disseminated terror. Because of this history, and similarly to its neighbours, the nature of threats differs from a European perspective; for Colombia, the most pressing concerns were – and still are – envisioned from a domestic or transnational perspective, including new security threats emerging through globalization, such as drug trafficking, transnational crime, money laundering, corruption, as well as the proliferation

⁸ According to Fernando A. Chinchilla and Janneth A. Vargas, *Peacekeeping Country Profile: Colombia*, 25 June 2016, <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/2016/06/23/peacekeeping-country-profile-colombia/>

⁹ Colombia: Exporter of Security and Stability, Colombian Embassy to the United States, 2015, <http://www.colombiaemb.org/sites/default/files/Colombia.%20Exporter%20of%20Security%20and%20Stability.pdf>

¹⁰ “Colombia and the EU sign Framework Agreement on participation in EU crisis management operations,” Press Release, Bogotá, 5 June 2014, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/colombia/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20140806_ue_operaciones_de_gestion_de_crisis_en.pdf

¹¹ Nat Smith, “Colombia to take part in UN peace-keeping missions,” *Colombia Reports*, 27 January 2015, <http://colombiareports.com/colombia-take-part-un-peace-keeping-missions/>

¹² “Daniel Flesmes and Leslie Wehner, “Drivers of Strategic Contestation in South America,” German Institute of Global and Area Studies, GIGA Research Programme, October 2012, p. 1, https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/wp207_flesmes_wehner.pdf



of small arms and light weapons.¹³ Adding to these challenges, Colombia still counts among the first nations in the world for the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The plethora of threats explains why the state's conception of security is deeply multidimensional, including political, economic, social, health, and human rights-related concerns. This relates to the strategy followed by the late 1990s to successfully fight and weaken the guerrillas that had mushroomed since the 1960s, justifying their battle against the government with the need to fight for more social justice, less economic inequality and better governance.

Having been at war with insurgent groups for decades and having faced dreadful security challenges due to narco-crimes and trafficking, Colombia managed a remarkable turnaround. Only 15 years ago, the country was widely considered to be on the verge of becoming a failed state. When Álvaro Uribe was sworn into presidential office in August 2002, he was saluted by mortar shells fired into the centre of the capital of Bogotá.¹⁴ Less than 15 years after this tragic event, Colombia had completed peace talks and signed peace with the FARC and started (difficult yet promising) discussion with the ELN, while having increased security and grown economically, which serves as a success story for overcoming both security threats and economic challenges. Criminality has steadily decreased: kidnappings have declined by 92% since 2000 – reaching a historical low of

188 kidnapped (mostly as a criminal activity) and now on the verge of becoming an “extinct crime.”¹⁵ Over the last 25 years, the homicide rate decreased from 381 to 24.4 per 100,000, reaching its lowest since 1974.¹⁶ And in terms of the military campaign against insurgencies, the FARC today is barely the existential threat it was during the 1990s, when it launched its “Campaign for a New Bolivarian Colombia.” At its peak, in 2002-2003, the FARC could muster around 18-20,000 foot soldiers, while today it can barely count on 30% of its former capacities (manpower, weapons, resources).¹⁷ In the same timeframe, violently controlled areas have decreased from 60% to 10% of the country, whilst insurgents were pushed to remote places and peripheries of the country.

Reasons for this success lie in a comprehensive strategy that is worth studying: while Colombia was below the radar in the 1980s, the impressive development of the drug business shed light on an almost failed state. Especially in Washington, the need to “fix” what was a growing concern led to initiating a joint war on drugs. While the Colombians were always in the lead of the operations, tensions between Washington and Bogotá sometimes emerged. At first, US involvement under the Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton administrations was strictly limited to military aid targeting only narco-trafficking and drug lords. Even if the Colombian representatives tried to explain at length that, since 1982, the FARC

¹³ Monica Herz, “Concepts of Security in South America,” *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 5, 1 November 2010: 605, doi:10.1080/13533312.2010.516938.

¹⁴ Juan Forero, “Explosions Rattle Colombian Capital during Inaugural,” *New York Times*, 8 August 2002, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/08/world/explosions-rattle-colombian-capital-during-inaugural.html?_r=0

¹⁵ Adrian Aaselma, “Kidnapping, a crime going virtually extinct in Colombia,” *Colombia Reports*, 7 June 2016, <http://colombiareports.com/91-kidnappings-colombia-now-carried-common-criminals/>

¹⁶ Finance Colombia, *Colombia's 2016 Homicide Rate Was Nation's Lowest Since 1974*, 2 January 2017 <http://www.financecolombia.com/colombia-homicide-rate-2016-nations-lowest-since-1974/>

¹⁷ Other sources claim FARC are still over 16,000 guerrillas, but this data might include former soldiers.



had been massively engaged in the cocaine trade, the US Congress only agreed on using its military aid against illegal crops.¹⁸

A major change occurred in 1998, when Andrés Pastrana was elected President. To end the conflict, Pastrana sought a comprehensive approach, where fighting the cartels and the rebels, destroying coca fields and promoting harmonious economic development went hand in hand. In October 1998, Pastrana officially launched the “Plan Colombia,” hailed as the equivalent of a new Marshall Plan. He estimated the cost to be around \$7.5 billion for six years, more than half funded by Colombia itself.¹⁹ However, US policy did not change and continued to focus on anti-drugs operations, while Pastrana was thinking strategically to end the war with the FARC by using some of the US funding to strike against the rebel groups.²⁰ Despite a massive influx of \$1 billion in additional funding for the fiscal year 2000, there were pending issues about the real purposes and aims of “Plan Colombia.”

The 9/11 terrorist attacks removed all intellectual reservations when the 2002 US National Security Strategy recognized the “link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups,” which justified a growing involvement to “help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed

groups of both the left and right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provide basic security to the Colombian people.”²¹ With no more artificial boundaries between narco-traffickers and terrorist groups, the US footprint grew in terms of doctrine, institutions, and equipment. However, this aid stayed within certain limits, as the US Congress made clear that the number of US troops and contractors was never to cross a 800 and 600 threshold respectively. It is also worth noting that the US engagement was considered affordable: since 2000, the US has invested \$10 billion in Colombia, a minimal amount when compared to Afghanistan where Washington spent \$1.6 trillion (or \$10 billion every 29 days).²²

Plan Colombia – together with its spin-offs – was henceforth a Colombian idea, and was put into practice by the Colombians themselves. Then-President Uribe and his successor Santos shared the principle that the state should actively produce security for its population. The Defense and Democratic Security Policy (*Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática*) aimed at unifying all different actors in a holistic and comprehensive manner under a single “Integral Action Command,” combining all political, economic, social and military dimensions, with a clear focus on producing sustainable security as the first step to implement confidence measures. The armed forces and police were in charge of reconquering lost territory,

¹⁸ William Marcy, *The Politics of Cocaine: How U.S. Foreign Policy Has Created a Thriving Drug Industry in Central and South America*, Chicago, Chicago Review Press, 2010.

¹⁹ One key misunderstanding is linked to the fact that Pastrana did not seek the support of his own governmental institutions, but submitted his first draft – in English – in Washington to the US Congress, thus giving the impression that it was a US-led initiative (see Luz E. Nagl, *Plan Colombia: Reality Of the Colombian Crisis and Implications for Hemispheric Security*, Strategic Studies Institute, December 2002, p. 3-4).

²⁰ Arlene Tickner, “Colombia: U.S. Subordinate, Autonomous Actor, or Something in Between,” in *Latin American and Caribbean Foreign Policy*, ed. Frank O. Mora and Jeanne A. K. Hey, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 180–1.

²¹ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington D.C., 17 September 2002, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>

²² Dan Restrepo et al., “The United States and Colombia: From Security Partners to Global Partners in Peace,” *Center for American Progress*, Foreign Policy and Security, February 2, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2016/02/02/130251/the-united-states-and-colombia-from-security-partners-to-global-partners-in-peace/>



protecting the safe return of governmental institutions in formerly ungoverned spaces and thereby guaranteeing the harmonious economic development that goes with it.²³ In a way, the goal was to expel the guerrillas from their territory and force them to leave their strongholds; more than destroying them, the goal was to break the influence they had over the population. The subsequent 2012 “Sword of Honor” campaign went after the guerrilla’s leadership as well as their assets, by targeting their main drug trafficking units. In 2014, Colombia seized about 200 of the 350 tons of cocaine produced in the country; in 2016 over 300 tons were seized, setting a new record.

In addition, Colombia’s economy was expanding remarkably, experiencing an average of 4.3 % in GDP growth between 2007 and 2015. Real success has been reflected in the decreasing unemployment rates, the expanding social benefits, and the shrinking poverty rate (decreasing from 42 to 28 % since 2008). Colombia remains the only Latin American country that never defaulted on its debt and foreign investment has remained high since 2012.

However, with a strong inflation rate, food prices on the rise, the crash in oil prices (Colombia is the third largest oil-producer in South America), and the effects of the climate phenomenon El Niño, Colombia has seen its growth downgraded and may face a few bleak years before it can continue its success story. This economic outlook, together with an uncertain post-conflict security situation, explains the fading popularity of the government.

The Colombian peace deal

Despite fading popularity, the Colombian government has not walked away from seeking peace and stability. On the contrary, in challenging times, the government has been increasingly eager to guarantee the success of the peace process with the FARC, which is seen as the key condition for long-term economic development. Colombia has already gained experience in settling peace agreements and implementing demobilization campaigns, for example in the case of the paramilitaries – the infamous United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Every Colombian president since President Belisario Betancur’s administration in 1984 has negotiated with the FARC, with little success so far.

The worst case occurred under Pastrana and the El Caguán Peace Process (1999-2002), which granted the FARC a demilitarized zone as big as Switzerland where the Colombian military could not enter. These concessions were used by guerrillas to rearm, strengthen their position and plan their future attacks, until President Uribe launched a high-level military offensive against rebel groups. The transformed Colombian military managed to cut the number of enemy fighters by half, kill the top leaders, and regain territory in an 8-year-long war.

Nonetheless, when Santos was appointed, he decided to reach out to the rebels. To put an end to the conflict, one had to admit that a complete defeat of the enemy had not been achieved – and was probably not possible; and that eradication of the guerrilla groups’ key components would leave the FARC with no political capacity to engage in peace negotiations. By the same token, the FARC realized not only that

²³ Jérôme Cario, *L’Action intégrale ou la récupération sociale du territoire en Colombie*, Paris, CDEF, 2008.



a military victory over the state was no longer within their possibilities, but also that it could achieve its goals solely through political participation. Therefore, the parties started to come to the negotiating table in 2011, holding confidential talks, first in Oslo and then in Havana.

However, the government had set strict conditions: in order not to restart what had failed in the past, the negotiation would decouple the peace process from the ceasefire; in other words, the military carried out their operations throughout the period, striking the FARC leadership and trying to convince guerrilla fighters to leave the jungle by offering appealing measures – since 2002, the government has reintegrated over 57,000 ex-militants from the FARC and AUC into society. In addition, there was to be no discussion concerning the country's political and economic system, or the future of the armed forces, and – consistent with the moral, political, and legal principles of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – no impunity would be granted to war criminals and those who committed crimes against humanity.

According to former Colombian Defence Minister (and current Ambassador to the US) Juan Carlos Pinzón, those guerrillas who speak the truth could thus expect a shortened sentence of 5-8 years, but they will have to participate in demining and the elimination of illegal crops; while those who do not cooperate will have to serve longer sentences. But the implementation of the peace deal and the process of transitional justice and the reintegration of rebels into civilian life have been widely criticized, following former President Uribe's campaign, considering its terms as unconditional amnesty for perpetrators

of violence. Discussions were somewhat heated when the current administration decided to apply the same treatment to what Pinzón calls the “bad guys of good guys,” those Colombian forces who committed war crimes, which is widely perceived as a political necessity in order to reach a sustainable agreement with the FARC.

By 24th August, 2016, negotiations and peace talks finally resulted in the signature of the General Agreement (*Acuerdo general para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera*). This final and comprehensive peace accord identifies a roadmap for disarming around 7,000 guerrilla combatants and concentrating them in 23 normalization zones. The implementation of the agreement would be verified by the UN, through the monitoring of the ceasefire and disarmament, within the deployment of a “temporary and provisional” mission.²⁴

The government's main hurdle has been, throughout the process, to bring reconciliation, peace and justice to balance, while concessions to the rebels were thought necessary, including amnesty for the guerrillas. Both the political landscape and the population have been polarized around these measures, and even Human Rights Watch has described the transitional justice arrangement as a measure that “will ensure that those responsible for atrocities on both sides of the conflict escape meaningful punishment.” In the long term, the feeling of impunity might affect peace building and the reintegration of FARC members into Colombian society and politics, which is an idea that is not fully accepted by part of the community. The results of the failed October 2016 referendum can thus be seen as the materialization of the fears and angst that run among the Colombians. And this

²⁴ UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Colombia*, 23 December 2016, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/1095



explains the new amendments put into the latest agreement, trying to settle the disputes, garnering broader political support, and finally consolidating peace. As a result, beginning January 2017, multiple reports mentioned that the FARC had started effective demobilization of their front.

The development of Colombia's security and defence strategy

The peace deal between the Colombian government and the FARC is of undeniable importance: an impressive achievement from which many lessons can be drawn. This also holds true for the major changes that have intervened inside Colombia's security strategy, providing an interesting overview of how a country can recover from an internal conflict and design a strategy for current and future challenges, both domestic and international. Colombia officials refer to it as the "five rings":

- the First Ring deals with domestic security concerns, reaching from counterinsurgency plans to welfare and the security of the land. The government has developed three specific strategies: the "Sword of Honor" war plan to fight guerrillas and terrorism, which is handled by the military and law enforcement; the eradication of criminal gangs and drugs, handled by the national police; and the "Green Heart" police strategy, to ensure citizens' security through policing and judicial duties;
- the Second Ring aims at protecting the borders: Colombia has five neighbours on land with which it shares porous borders that allow traffickers to smuggle drugs, cash and people. As a transit country for sending narcotics to the US and Africa (and later Europe), Colombia is committed to ensuring continuous border security;

- the Third Ring looks at regional security: some of the region's countries face challenges similar to those Colombia was facing in the 1990s. Bogotá recognizes that transnational threats can only successfully be countered within a regional effort, taking on the responsibility to assist its neighbours to upgrade regional security. As a Colombian defence official noted: "Security is imprinted deep in Colombia's DNA and it feels right to help others to improve their security." Colombia is engaging in capability development and training for counterinsurgency, interdiction of narcotics, and intelligence sharing with Central American countries, including Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador;

- the Fourth Ring goes a bit beyond simple regional concerns and tackles hemispheric security: this includes Colombia's partnerships with both South and North American partners, going from political dialogue, to the sharing of intelligence, information and capabilities, as well as policy coordination in regional fora, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR);

- finally, the Fifth Ring addresses the global perspective: this is the most strategic ring, because it is related to the future of Colombia's armed forces, which are expected to have acquired different kinds of capabilities after the fight against the FARC is completed. At the same time, the Colombian military aim not to lose their unique skills, gained over five decades of fighting unconventional warfare, hoping to export their knowledge under the auspices of international organizations.

This is in alignment with Colombia's aims to be



more present in international security in the future; though the type of engagement has not been spelled out clearly. While Bogotá's military leadership imagines contributing with a small and highly professional force, similar to what Colombia is already doing in Central America, President Santos has offered to contribute large numbers (up to 5,000) Colombian forces to future UN peacekeeping missions.²⁵ Either way, Bogotá is eager to work with the UN, the EU and NATO in multilateral frameworks.

The internationalization of Colombia's security strategy goes hand in hand with transforming the mission of its armed forces. With about 450,000 active personnel, Colombia possesses the twelfth largest force in the world, spending about 3.5% of its GDP on defence.²⁶ The armed forces have taken on an important role in the country, are deeply connected to society and respected for improving the security situation. Their slogan reflects the public attitude towards the military: "we are in the hearts of the Colombians and stay there" (*"estamos en el corazón de los Colombianos y ahí nos vamos a quedar"*). While the Colombian military is in the hearts of their people to stay, it is clear that they are in the process of adapting to their new missions and capacities. This also explains why, in order to equip Colombian forces for their new local, regional and international tasks, the Colombian government has developed a 2030 military transformation plan preparing the route to transforming technology, doctrine, education and force structure.

In its latest effort to gain experience in a multinational maritime mission, Colombia materialized its

framework agreement on participation in crisis management operations with the EU, sending the Ocean Patrol Vessel (OPV) ARC 7 DE AGOSTO to the Gulf of Aden to assist in the EU's maritime security mission ATALANTA for five months. The vessel's crew consisted of members of all branches of the country's armed forces and was assisted by a Spanish Navy liaison team. This endeavour was carefully planned together with Spanish and British allies. Because the Colombian forces were not integrated into the ATALANTA force structure, the military did not need a mandate from the Colombian parliament. It also allowed for a flexible use of the troops to gain maximum experience, for example by also undertaking counter-piracy training with NATO's Operation Ocean Shield. After participating in the operations off the Horn of Africa, the same vessel also conducted search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

The military's effort to gain relevant experience can be regarded as a first step towards transforming the military from fighting guerrilla warfare at home to becoming a highly-skilled, readily deployable peacekeeping force, exporting capabilities and security to far away regions, as an effort to upgrade Colombia's standing in international politics and to find a new mission.

Why NATO should think more about Colombia

Promoting the country's soft power abroad is in alignment with Colombia's increasingly international

²⁵ Nat Smith, "Colombia to take part in UN peace-keeping missions," quoted.

²⁶ It is important to note that the National Police of Colombia of about 180,000 policemen is mandated under the Ministry of Defence as a branch of the country's armed forces, and thus included in these statistics. Nevertheless, Colombia's sole military force strength remains the third largest in the Americas, behind the US and Brazil.



orientation since the agenda change from Uribe to Santos. With a peace agreement in sight, the current administration has shifted the focus from security, drugs and terrorism to more global issues, such as climate change, human rights, energy security, and the reform of international economic institutions. Colombia's ambition to engage in international organizations also signals that the country is aiming to extend its strategic relations beyond the US as a result of Bogotá's positive emergence as a regional leader, and beyond, as Colombia even took a non-permanent UN Security Council seat in 2011-2012.

For NATO, working closely with Colombia would be a matter of simply expanding what has already started. In 2009, the Defence Minister Santos approached the Alliance to express his government's interest in contributing to ISAF operations in Afghanistan. A Colombian contribution turned out to be impossible, however, because the government did not have a mandate to send troops to foreign soil, and because of domestic priorities, it would have taken too long to get approval of Congress and the courts. In 2011, when Colombia was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Bogotá proved its support for NATO by voting for the Alliance's mission in Libya.

Under the presidency of Santos, Colombia re-approached NATO in March 2013. Not only was the already mentioned "Agreement on the Security of Information" signed, but additional visits took place, discussing potential avenues for increased

cooperation, on a case-by-case basis.²⁷ This only reinforced what Santos desired in terms of starting "a process of rapprochement and cooperation, with an eye toward also joining that organization [even if impossible under the extant provisions of NATO's founding treaty]."²⁸ His unfortunate remarks about the possibility of Colombia joining NATO stirred loud opposition among Colombia's neighbours: Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Nicaragua described the agreement as "madness" and as a "threat for the region," and said that it violated the UNASUR Peace Treaty. While less dogmatic, Brazil's Defence Minister Celso Amorim also voiced his opposition to Colombia's agreement with an extra-continental military alliance.²⁹

Bogotá's officials have countered their neighbours' concerns by underlining that Colombia cannot actually join NATO as a member state because the country does not fulfill the geographical criteria of the North Atlantic Treaty's Article 10.³⁰ Pinzón also stressed that the Colombian government would not invite NATO forces to be stationed on their territory. Beyond these clarifications, it should be noted that the agreement did not even come into force. In September 2013, Colombia's Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs sent a bill to the Colombian parliament, which ratified the agreement in 2014. In June 2015, however, the Colombian Constitutional Court declared the agreement to be unconstitutional because of a series of legal mistakes.

Bogotá's diplomatic and military cooperation with

²⁷ "NATO and Colombia discuss future of cooperation," *Press Release*, 19 March 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_108117.htm

²⁸ "Colombia Expresses Interest in Joining NATO," *Atlantic Council*, 4 June 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/colombia-expresses-interest-in-joining-nato>

²⁹ These reactions are in alignment with the opposition to US and European military presence in South America, rooted in colonial memories and the US legacy of the Cold War. The US only maintains bases in Honduras and El Salvador, after Ecuador's President Rafael Correa decided to close the US military base in his country in 2009. South American security policymakers are especially concerned about US and NATO presence on the continent, as some have voiced the fear of an Iraq-style military invasion by the US, for example in the event of Washington aiming to overthrow an anti-American regime.

³⁰ "The North Atlantic Treaty" (NATO, 1949), http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/stock_publications/20120822_nato_treaty_en_light_2009.pdf.



NATO has been unfolding, even if the intelligence sharing agreement has found no practical application. Since Colombia's first political visit to NATO in March 2013, the government has been in contact with various NATO bodies, including the International Staff (specifically high-level meetings with Deputy Secretary General Vershbow and Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy Thrasyvoulos Terry Stamatopoulos), the International Military Staff, SHAPE (Colombia is represented with a permanent liaison officer), ACT, the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, the NATO Defense College, and individual member states' delegations. Colombia is one of the few non-partner states, along with China, India, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, that engages in meetings in flexible formats with NATO states.³¹ In 2014 and 2015, former Vice-Defence Minister Enrique Bedoya Vizcaya was active in promoting Colombia as a valuable partner, especially among the smaller Eastern European Allies that have been increasingly focusing on territorial defence as a result of tensions with Russia.

Colombia follows the strategy of building relationships with key constituents of the Alliance, while keeping their engagement publically low-level – with the exception of Santos' public announcement – in order not to stir further opposition from its neighbours that may disrupt the process of building closer relations with NATO. The two parties also stepped up practical military cooperation. In addition to the recent training with NATO's Operation Ocean Shield, Colombia has supported

exercises with NATO members, for example in transport and refueling, thereby gaining insights into the Alliance's "gold standard" of interoperability. Colombia sent observers to "Trident Juncture 2015," NATO's largest exercise in over a decade. Colombia's Ministry of Defence has joined the Building Integrity Programme,³² the Ammunition Safety Group, and the Codification System.³³

Obstacles for closer cooperation exist on both sides. Colombia's political process is protracted. It takes time to promote the strategic idea of changing the mission of Colombia's forces from protecting their liberal domestic order against the guerrillas at home to sending troops abroad to UN missions in regions far away from Colombia's immediate concerns. Similarly, within NATO, territorial defence and the renewed importance of Article 5 have been emphasized more than the engagement with new potential partners abroad. In addition, Colombia is unusual territory for NATO officials because the organization has had little contact with South Americans in the past, and because Colombia still carries the image of a conflict-ridden country, hence many policymakers may simply not realize the benefits of working with it.

Against the backdrop of gradually developing relations, it is important to outline the rationale for cooperation between NATO and Colombia based on mutual benefits: by entering into a partnership with NATO, Colombia would reinvigorate its international commitments alongside other democracies. Institutionalizing the partnership, NATO could utilize its experiences

³¹ "Relations with Partners across the Globe," *NATO*, 7 September 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/tr/natolive/topics_49188.htm?selectedLocale=tr

³² "The Secretary General's Annual Report 2015," *NATO*, 28 January 2016, 79, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_01/20160128_SG_AnnualReport_2015_en.pdf

³³ "NATO and Colombia Discuss Future of Cooperation," *NATO*, 19 March 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_108117.htm



of force transformation in Eastern Europe to assist Colombia in implementing the reorganization of its military. Colombia could benefit from gaining further experience in multinational operations and assistance in building capacity for humanitarian aid and disaster relief, in addition to maintaining readiness in peacetime. NATO would similarly benefit: partnerships remain one of NATO's core instruments for gaining diplomatic and military support from liberal-minded states. Including the first South American state as a partner could contribute to strengthening the Alliance's legitimacy as a global security provider.

From a purely military standpoint, Colombia could add value through its unique capabilities and expertise in fighting irregular warfare with a decisive military and political strategy, applying the lesson successfully towards a peace agreement with the FARC. Troops have built strong counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities in the "war amongst the people," which could be useful in Afghanistan but also applicable in countries torn by civil war such as Libya. Colombian forces possess special skills in air policing, explosive ordnance disposal and landmine clearing, and infrastructure projects in post-conflict environments. Arguably, Bogotá could become a key partner in fighting organized crime and cracking down on the South America-African narco-trafficking networks.³⁴ While these tasks are not at the core of NATO's mandates, the Alliance should not disregard them, especially if transnational crime

became linked to terrorism financing. Furthermore, Colombia offers a case study of resilience in the face of multifaceted challenges, having neither become a failed state nor lost its democratic aspirations.

In addition, Colombia's unique geostrategic situation is of some interest to NATO member states, as it deals with an increased Russian footprint. One example is the role of Venezuela, because Caracas has been steadily advancing its cooperation with Russia. Since 2005, Venezuela has purchased \$11 billion worth of equipment from Russia, including fighter jets, helicopters and rifles.³⁵ Moscow provided loans to Caracas to help purchase the S-300VM anti-ballistic missile system to protect Venezuelan waters in 2013. The recent acquisition made Venezuela the second biggest importer of Russian arms between 2012 and 2015, after India.³⁶ Lately, Russia also sent warships to the Caribbean to perform drug patrols.³⁷ Colombians were outraged in October 2013, when two Russian supersonic bombers, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, flew from Venezuela to Nicaragua over San Andres, disputed territory between Colombia and Nicaragua. In March 2015, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro ordered the major military exercise "Bolivarian Shield," with Russian participation, as a response to US sanctions against seven Venezuelan officials. Russia's engagement in the region can be regarded as a revitalization of Cold War partnerships to counter US leadership across the Americas, and even in reaction to NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe.

³⁴ For example, Italian 'Ndrangheta mafia members were arrested in Colombia in 2013. See: "Italian 'Top Mafia Boss' Caught in Colombia," *BBC News*, 6 July 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-23209170>

³⁵ Evan Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Return to the 'Strategic Game' in a Complex-Interdependent Post-Cold War World?," *U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute*, 24 April 2015

³⁶ "Russia's Cooperation With Latin America to Counterbalance NATO Expansion," *Sputnik*, February 14, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20150214/1018278598.html>.

³⁷ Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Return to the 'Strategic Game' in a Complex-Interdependent Post-Cold War World?"



Moving the partnership forward

If NATO and Colombia were to enter into a partnership agreement, the two parties would negotiate a bilateral Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP), a biennial meeting format for identifying areas of cooperation. The document lays the legal grounds for the relationship and mandates the executive bodies to implement specific collaboration efforts. Technically, the plan needs to be renewed every two years and thus approved by Colombia's Congress and courts. Additions and changes in the text may delay a review of the cooperation agreement and bring the legal grounds for cooperation into question every two years. It would therefore be advantageous to formulate a document broad enough to be applicable for a wide range of joint activities, and specific enough to be declared constitutional by the courts.

While this task remains in the hands of the policymakers, the IPCP could include the following areas:

- Political dialogue: the basis of the partnership should remain within NATO's mission to better engage with global partners through "enhanced political consultation on security issues of common concern,"³⁸ in the 28+1 format (the 28 members of the North Atlantic Council plus Colombia). In addition to consulting on transatlantic drug trafficking, Colombia could help maintain awareness of Venezuela's and Nicaragua's activities with Russia, which have arguably been under much of NATO's radar thus far. The dialogue could be enhanced by increased staff talks through the appointment of a NATO Contact Point Embassy in Bogotá and establish-

ment of a Colombian representation at NATO Headquarters.

- Information and intelligence sharing: successful cooperation in the political and military sphere requires trust building and effective communication. If NATO and Colombia aim to collaborate in countering transatlantic crime and threats such as drug-trafficking, the parties would need to establish smooth channels of communication. Colombian courts have, for the time being, opposed the NATO-Colombia Agreement on the Security of Information to protect sensitive personal information on Colombian citizens. In order to be effective and work on legal grounds, the agreement would need to be formulated more precisely. The successful exchange of information would also serve as a trust building measure by benefiting both parties and helping work towards common goals.
- Capability development: NATO could assist in capability and capacity building as well as improving interoperability. The Alliance possesses valuable expertise in defence reform to equip the Colombian forces for partaking in multinational peacekeeping operations. These efforts could be complemented financially by a NATO Trust Fund to support defence transformation, even if this would require the approval of all NATO member states, which could encounter at least some issues. Possibly, the US could allow Colombia to utilize US military aid for funding its cooperation with NATO.
- Participation in operations: to genuinely achieve the goal of taking on new missions, Co-

³⁸ "Active Engagement in Cooperative Security: A More Efficient and Flexible Partnership Policy," para. 5.



Colombia would have to participate in military operations abroad – at least in the medium term, depending on the effective demobilization process of the FARC and the political climate in the country. Colombia could start with participation in the NATO-led “Resolute Support” mission in Afghanistan, for example, by applying its capabilities in demining or dealing with eradication of illegal crops. Bogotá could also assist in drafting security and development strategies for Afghanistan, having already trained Afghan police forces to counter opium production and trade. In fact, Colombia is one of the world’s few success cases in fighting drugs, as well as internal terrorism and guerrilla warfare, and could therefore serve as a capable and credible partner in conflict and post-conflict missions in the future.

- Enhanced educational exchange and training: for NATO and Colombia to achieve maximum value from the partnership, it is necessary for military and civilian experts to understand the other party’s capabilities, doctrines and organizational structure. The Colombian Ministry of Defence has already sent a policy officer to partake in a NATO Defense College course, and the Colombian forces are using every chance possible to learn about NATO, for example by attending the Chief of Transformation Conference in Norfolk, Virginia in December 2014 and the NATO-led Conference of Commandants in June 2015. This is fully aligned on the Alliance’s partnership policy that “welcomes partner contributions to education, training and capacity building for Allies and partners.”³⁹ Therefore, NATO could echo Bogotá’s efforts by

learning from Colombia’s experience in fighting irregular warfare and exporting their expertise in the region. This would not only serve as an acknowledgement of Colombia’s work to promote itself as a partner, but NATO could actually gain operational insights and access to training facilities in unique jungle, mountain and maritime terrain.

Conclusion

Colombia’s experience is to be valued, as it went from being an almost failed state to being a key actor on the South American continent in less than twenty years. Of course, the remarkable progress should not be exaggerated and the country still faces problems related to security, drugs, human rights, internal displacement, infrastructure and institutional capacity. However, this should not hinder cooperation based on common goals and values, especially because establishing a partnership with NATO is already “one of Colombia’s highest strategic priorities.”⁴⁰ Bogotá is eager to become a major exporter of security and play a larger role in international fora, where it could support the Alliance’s efforts in promoting international peace and stability. Being on the verge of transforming its forces, Colombia stands ready to implement NATO standards and add its own expertise to the Alliance’s capabilities. At the same time, NATO has the chance to institutionalize its first partnership with a truly democratic government in South America, a region that should not be forgotten in the light of more immediate security concerns at Europe’s borders.

³⁹ Ibid. para. 7.

⁴⁰ According to an official in the Colombian Ministry of Defence



Rather than discussing the issue of membership, which always clouds the relationship between NATO and European aspirant countries, the case of Colombia is very much seen as a way of gaining credibility in international fora and establishing oneself as an international security actor, while reducing costs by tapping into the Alliance's experience in peace support operations and interoperability. As today's "Partners Across the Globe" are mainly situated in Asia and the Pacific, NATO should consider broadening its portfolio, thinking of a partnership with a Latin American country as a natural extension of existing relationships. In this regard, Colombia makes for a remarkable case study to explore the possibili-

ties of cooperation with the region. No international organization committed to solving global security issues in a cooperative approach should allow itself the luxury of ignoring certain parts of the world. This is especially true for NATO, which has already committed to a "360 degree approach to deter threats."⁴¹ A partnership with Colombia based on genuine practical cooperation could display the advantages of working with NATO. Given their shared history and vested interest in Colombia, some allies should take a leadership role in boosting this cooperation with a view to further developing the Alliance's relations throughout the Western Hemisphere.

⁴¹ NATO, "Statement by NATO Defence Ministers," *NATO*, 25 June 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_121133.htm