

A PATH FORWARD FOR COLOMBIA'S 2016 PEACE ACCORD AND LASTING SECURITY

A publication by the Atlantic Council's US-Colombia Advisory Group

WITH: Isabel Chiriboga and Geoff Ramsey





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COVER: La Casa Indigena, where some Indigenous Colombians have taken refuge after being displaced from their lands due to clashes between illegal armed groups in their territories, in Riohacha, Colombia February 27, 2024. Source: REUTERS/Antonio Cascio November 2024

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FOREWORD

I am grateful to the US-Colombia Advisory Group for inviting me to share these words and for its valuable work in advancing the US-Colombian partnership.

Peace processes are constituent moments in any country, generating great expectations and hope. However, a peace accord alone—even the most innovative one—does not automatically produce the transformative changes necessary to create peace. Full implementation, in the social, political, and economic spheres, is required to consolidate peace for the decades to come.

Realism is of the essence. Peace agreements take time to implement. This is why the 2016 Peace Accord between the government of Colombia and the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC-EP) sets a fifteen-year horizon to ensure its implementation. Eight years after it was signed, the significant and tangible progress that has taken place is a testament to the hard work and sacrifices of many. Few peace agreements indeed manage to truly consolidate as vectors of political change. It is worthy of celebration.

But the eighth anniversary of the accord is also an opportunity to acknowledge that more work needs to be done to address challenges such as persistent violence in rural areas, the murder of social leaders and former combatants, the slow implementation of structural reforms, and the need to strengthen the territorial and cross-cutting approaches of the agreement.

One important lesson to emerge from Colombia is that sustainable peace is not achieved solely by the demobilization of armed groups. Despite FARC-

EP’s disarmament and reintegration, dissidents and criminal groups emerged to occupy the spaces left by the former guerrillas. This underlines the need for a comprehensive approach to security, which not only creates peace, but also dismantles the illicit economies that fuel violence. Security is not achieved solely through disarmament, but also through the creation of viable economic alternatives for affected communities and the capacity of the state to consolidate its central role in the areas once occupied by armed groups.

Amid it all, prioritizing the rights and needs of victims is crucial to strengthening the legitimacy of the accord and allowing for reconciliation. Despite the difficulties and significant delays, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and reparation processes established by the accord remain one of Colombia’s greatest contributions to the practice of peacebuilding globally. The JEP’s ability to deliver justice rapidly and ensure legal security to those under its jurisdiction will be essential to the legitimacy of the peace process and the durability of peace.

As it engages other armed groups into negotiating peace settlements, it is crucial the Colombian state doesn’t lose sight of the importance of safeguarding and prioritizing the comprehensive implementation of the 2016 accord. It presents a carefully designed road map of coherent political responses to comprehensively tackle some of the main challenges that Colombia faces today: violence, insecurity, inequality, drug trafficking, and exclusion of marginalized populations. Following this road to the end will open many more such opportunities for all. But that will first and foremost require a full and successful implementation of the accord.

Dag Nylander

Director, Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colombia's 2016 peace accord between the government of Colombia and the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP) is often held up as one of the more successful instances of conflict resolution in history, putting an end to the longest-running armed conflict in the western hemisphere. Support for this accord, and for its full implementation, has been a cornerstone of the US-Colombia relationship since the beginning of its negotiation in 2010. When it was signed, the accord laid out a fifteen-year roadmap to implement provisions meant to reform the country's rural economy, reduce illicit crop cultivation, provide peace in neglected areas, and establish democratic guarantees to protect the rights of social activists and victims of the conflict.

However, halfway through the accord's implementation period, progress has been slow. According to the Peace Accords Matrix of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies,¹ which is responsible for technical verification and monitoring of implementation of the accord, as of **May 2024** the Colombian government has fully implemented 33 percent of its stipulations, while 37 percent saw “minimum”² implementation, and 20 percent are in an “intermediate” state.³ Evidence from the Kroc Institute suggests that at the current rate, the accord's implementation will not reach full implementation before the established deadline of 2031. The delay further complicates

Colombia's search for peace amid rising security concerns in the country, in addition to posing a threat to US security interests in the hemisphere and contributing to the flow of illicit goods northward.

Through a series of consultations and roundtables with the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center's US-Colombia Advisory Group (UCAG), members identified that coordination challenges both at a national and territorial level between and among institutions with a role in the implementation of the accord have hindered its full implementation. Lack of coordination was also recognized throughout the three additional constraints identified:

- Proliferation and fragmentation of illegal armed groups and increased crime and violence in Colombia, which disproportionately impacts ethnic minorities, vulnerable populations, and the areas hardest hit by the conflict.
- Difficulty in prioritizing the 2016 peace accord amid a broader, unclear security strategy to combat illegal armed groups.
- Lack of progress in crop substitution programs launched as a result of the accord.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 **Prioritize the implementation of the ethnic chapter of the accord and its ethnic focus throughout, in coordination with peace negotiations and local ceasefires, to curb existing violence in isolated regions with predominantly Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and vulnerable populations including victims from the armed conflict. Addressing the severe delays in implementing these ethnic commitments requires an overhaul of state presence through strengthened policing, judicial systems, and economic support, all tailored to meet local needs and establish trust. Additionally the Petro government should improve coordination with local leaders and leverage the Special High-Level Forum with Ethnic Peoples (IEANPE) to secure community-driven progress. International partners, particularly the US, should provide dedicated technical and financial support to ensure sustainable implementation of the accord, with a focus on addressing specific needs of ethnic territories and creating viable economic opportunities to reduce illegal group influence.**

1 The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame is responsible for monitoring and technically verifying the implementation of the 2016 Colombian peace accord. The Kroc Institute's Peace Accords Matrix (PAM) Barometer Initiative in Colombia provides summary reports and briefs on the accord's implementation status to government officials, United Nations representatives, and other agencies. The Kroc Institute's methodology combines qualitative analysis with empirical data to assess the implementation of the accord's 558 stipulations, 74 subthemes, and eighteen themes.

2 meaning that some progress has been made but that more is needed to meet the timeframe.

3 meaning that full implementation is possible at the current pace.

2 Enhance the impact of existing, targeted development programs by increasing resource allocation and leveraging international support and local buy-in to develop targeted strategies to support newly identified conflict-prone and conflict-affected areas in Colombia. It is essential to incentivize development in conflict-affected areas, especially through the Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDETs) and Zones Most Affected by the Armed Conflict (ZOMACs) created under the 2016 peace accord. Despite their promise, these programs face funding shortages, weak institutional capacities, and ongoing security challenges that restrict effective implementation and delay critical infrastructure projects. Strengthening PDETs requires addressing resource allocation gaps, supporting local capacity-building, and prioritizing equitable development. Additionally, real-time data monitoring of conflict zones will enable targeted security and development interventions, with US support for local monitoring and evaluation actors enhancing resource distribution and operational effectiveness. By investing in community engagement and new support programs, the United States can bolster Colombia's stability, curb the expansion of illegal armed groups, and address significant shared security concerns.

3 Prioritize the implementation of the 2016 peace accord before the 2031 deadline to build stronger national and international support for creating more effective negotiation structures with illegal armed groups in Colombia. President Petro's establishment of the "Alta Instancia para la Implementación" reflects a commitment to better coordinate efforts across 54 government entities, backed by a significant budget allocation. However, poor coordination, limited budget execution, and a deteriorating security environment due to increased illegal armed group presence continue to obstruct progress. Observers from academia and civil society should support Colombia's efforts to streamline fund utilization, ensuring the accord's constitutional mandate is prioritized over political agendas. Successful negotiations with armed groups require a balanced, transparent approach grounded in inclusivity and monitored incentives, backed by a clear legislative framework, with insights from international partners like the US and Norway.

4 Support the independence and efficiency of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, an innovative and far-reaching transitional and restorative justice system in Colombia. Support for the JEP is key, yet many ex-combatants remain in legal limbo, and the JEP's delay in resolving key "macro cases" has weakened its credibility. Additionally, the inclusion of high-profile paramilitary figures not intended for JEP jurisdiction has further eroded public trust. To enhance peace process success, U.S. agencies should support Colombia's efforts to ensure victim and perpetrator participation in restorative justice. Improving JEP's communication with ethnic communities, coordinating across cases, and delivering culturally sensitive reparations are also vital for effective implementation and justice for serious conflict-related crimes.

INTRODUCTION

Colombia's 2016 peace accord between the government of Colombia and the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP) is often held up as one of the more successful instances of conflict resolution in history, putting an end to the longest-running armed conflict in the western hemisphere. Support for this accord, and for its full implementation, has been a cornerstone of the US-Colombia relationship since the beginning of its negotiation in 2010. When it was signed, the accord laid out a fifteen-year roadmap to implement provisions meant to reform the country's rural economy, reduce illicit crop cultivation, provide peace in neglected areas, and establish democratic guarantees to protect the rights of social activists and victims of the conflict.

However, halfway through the accord's implementation period, progress has been slow. According to the Peace Accords Matrix of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies,⁴ which is responsible for technical verification and monitoring of implementation of the accord, as of **May 2024** the Colombian government has fully implemented 33 percent of its stipulations, while 37 percent saw “minimum”⁵ implementation, and 20 percent are in an “intermediate” state.⁶ Evidence from the Kroc Institute suggests that at the current rate, the accord's implementation will not reach full implementation before the established deadline of 2031. The delay further complicates Colombia's search for peace amid rising security concerns in the country, in addition to posing a threat to US security interests in the hemisphere and contributing to the flow of illicit goods northward.

Factors that have hindered the accord's implementation include inconsistent political will, governance and coordination challenges and institutional weakness in areas affected by the conflict, insufficient allocation of resources, and, most importantly, the persistence of the armed conflict. Violent conflict persists in Colombia on **three fronts**: between the state and preexisting armed actors; between the state and new emerging actors, including FARC dissidents, illegal armed groups and transnational criminal organizations; and between and among these groups. The lag in implementation as a result of these factors carries implications for the future of the US-Colombia partnership.

Given that Colombia is past the halfway mark in the set timeframe, the time is ripe for accelerating the implementation of the 2016 peace accord. A broad consensus on this fact exists among local governments, the business community, multilateral partners, civil society, and, most importantly, between Washington and Bogotá. In an era of deepening instability and insecurity in neighboring Andean countries and, more broadly, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States has a clear interest in ensuring that Colombia overcomes its own security challenges and builds state presence in the areas hardest hit by violence and conflict. Indeed, the commitments that Colombia made in its 2016 peace accord have ramifications that go far beyond the initial objective of reaching peace with the FARC. If fully implemented, the accord could lay the foundation to deepen Colombia's democracy, bring new opportunities for investment in neglected but resource-rich areas of the country, and deal a crushing blow to organized crime. Although principally a Colombian achievement, a fully implemented accord would also be a capstone of over two decades of dedicated US commitment to Colombia. Achieving this, however, will require commitment and political will from the Colombian government to prioritize the implementation—as well as coordination and continued support from the United States.

Through a series of consultations and roundtables with the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center's US-Colombia Advisory Group (UCAG), members identified that coordination challenges both at a national and territorial level between and among institutions with a role in the implementation of the accord have hindered its full implementation. Lack of coordination was also recognized throughout the three additional constraints identified:

- Proliferation and fragmentation of illegal armed groups and increased crime and violence in Colombia, which disproportionately impacts ethnic minorities, vulnerable populations, and the areas hardest hit by the conflict.
- Difficulty in prioritizing the 2016 peace accord amid a broader, unclear security strategy to combat illegal armed groups.

⁴ The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame is responsible for monitoring and technically verifying the implementation of the 2016 Colombian peace accord. The Kroc Institute's Peace Accords Matrix (PAM) Barometer Initiative in Colombia provides summary reports and briefs on the accord's implementation status to government officials, United Nations representatives, and other agencies. The Kroc Institute's methodology combines qualitative analysis with empirical data to assess the implementation of the accord's 558 stipulations, 74 subthemes, and eighteen themes.

⁵ meaning that some progress has been made but that more is needed to meet the timeframe.

⁶ meaning that full implementation is possible at the current pace.

- Lack of progress in crop substitution programs launched as a result of the accord.

UCAG members propose that while addressing the lag in the accord's implementation requires a holistic approach, it is imperative to address the current rise in crime and violence in both urban and rural areas in Colombia, an issue that ranks as the **number one** concern of Colombians today.

This publication builds on the UCAG's first report, "Advancing US-Colombia Cooperation on Drug Policy and Law Enforcement," by outlining four recommendations on steps the United States and Colombia can take to accelerate the accord's implementation and simultaneously address the underlying issue of security in Colombia and the broader region. The three core challenges are discussed below.



General view of an area deforested by illegal mining in Puerto Guzman, Colombia. Source: REUTERS/Luisa Gonzalez

The proliferation and fragmentation of illegal armed groups and increased crime and violence in Colombia, which disproportionately impacts ethnic minorities, vulnerable populations, and the areas hardest hit by the conflict

Colombia's complex geography and richness in natural resources bring important opportunities for tourism and economic growth, but also require significant state capacity and resources to support the country's most rural and isolated areas. State-neglected areas are where illegal armed

groups thrive, enjoying full control and freedom of operation that pose extensive threats to local communities. The 2016 peace accord, while historic, only ended one armed conflict—between the Colombian state and the FARC-EP. According to the **International Committee of the Red Cross**, at least eight

“The forced displacement crisis in Riohacha has placed growing pressure on the resources of the Riohacha District, particularly in health, social welfare, security, and community cohesion. Displaced families face serious challenges in accessing a safe and stable environment, which heightens their need for assistance. Given the magnitude of the crisis, coordinated inter-institutional support and international cooperation are essential to alleviate the humanitarian impact.”

Genaro Redondo Choles, Mayor of Riohacha

domestic armed conflicts were identified in 2024, based on their legal classification.⁷ Three of the conflicts are between the Colombian state and illegal armed groups which aim to replace or overthrow the democratic government, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), and the former FARC-EP (Disidencias, by its current name in Spanish). The other five conflicts exclude the state and are between new and existing illegal armed groups (see table 1 below). All eight of the groups identified here engage in an array of illegal activities, principally narcotics production and trafficking, trade of people and illicit goods, illegal mining, and extortion. Included in these eight conflicts are groups that never demobilized when the accord was signed and those that took up arms again when

they claimed the accord was violated. In its majority, these conflicts take place within marginalized and rural communities, and community leaders in these areas have suffered disproportionately. In Petro’s first **two years**, more than 350 social leaders and human rights defenders and at least 75 signatories of the 2016 peace accord have been murdered, and over 165 massacres have occurred.

In **April 2024** 700 civil society organizations presented a report to the United Nations claiming that violence perpetrated by illegal armed groups has expanded by 36 percent in the first trimester of 2024, affecting 189 municipalities (almost 20 percent of Colombian territory), with over 272 violent events being recorded during the same period. In practice, the impact of rising violence

Table 1: Ongoing armed conflicts in Colombia (as of April 2024)

Estado Colombiano	vs	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)
Estado Colombiano	vs	Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC)
Estado Colombiano	vs	Antiguas FARC-EP actualmente no acogidas al Acuerdo de Paz
Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)	vs	Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC)
Antiguas FARC-EP actualmente no acogidas al Acuerdo de Paz	vs	Segunda Marquetalia
Antiguas FARC-EP actualmente no acogidas al Acuerdo de Paz	vs	Comandos de la Frontera-EB
Antiguas FARC-EP actualmente no acogidas al Acuerdo de Paz	vs	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)
Antiguas FARC-EP actualmente no acogidas al Acuerdo de Paz	vs	Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC)

Source: Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja

7 The International Committee of the Red Cross is based on International Humanitarian Law, which establishes two criteria for a situation of violence to be classified as a noninternational armed conflict: that the armed groups have a sufficient level of organization and that the hostilities between the parties reach a minimum level of intensity. Both must come together. The ICRC technically and objectively analyzes whether these two criteria are met on the basis of information collected directly in the territories.

in Colombia has resulted in over 400 violations of human rights both by state and nonstate actors. Communities under threat face heightened rates of recruitment, homicides, displacement, confinement, sexual violence, and other effects. To put things in perspective, on a national level, more than **145,049** people were individually displaced in 2023, which meant an increase of 18 percent compared to 2022. Territorial disputes among armed actors also led to the confinement of 47,013 people (in 2023), representing an increase of 19 percent at the national level compared to 2022.

This **report** of the Analytical Service of Colombian National Police (CEPOL) outlines that on a national level, extortion, homicides, and personal injuries have seen a significant increase

in the first trimester of 2024, while crimes such as theft and kidnapping have decreased. Many departments including Arauca, located on the border with Venezuela, have suffered a wave of killings as armed groups attack social leaders in areas controlled by rival groups and who are often accused of sympathizing with the “wrong” side. The reconfiguration of non-state armed actors extends beyond its initial reliance on drug trafficking, as such groups have diversified their operations to other forms of profitable illicit businesses such as illegal mining, human smuggling, and money laundering, exacerbating the humanitarian consequences that affect the civilian population. Their complex operations, which are related to the historical institutional weakness in the most remote areas of Colombia, show the long road that remains to achieve peace in Colombia.

“Since the 1990s, violence in Puerto Tejada has escalated, with an increase in homicides linked to its role as a drug trafficking corridor and the expansion of the Cali Cartel, as well as the arrival of paramilitaries who led “social cleansing” efforts and social control actions, primarily affecting young people. Today, violence continues with the proliferation of gangs, where youth engage in theft, extortion, and drug-related activities, while data shows alarming homicide rates and a pattern of intergenerational revenge. To address this situation, it is proposed to strengthen prevention programs for children and youth, resocialization for ex-convicts, and detox programs for substance users, while seeking alliances to improve security and coexistence in the municipality.”

Luz Adiela Salazar, Mayor of Puerto Tejada



An indigenous man rests in a hammock inside the Casa Indigena, where he takes refuge after being displaced from his land due to clashes between illegal armed groups in his territories, in Riohacha, Colombia. Source: REUTERS/Antonio Cascio

Difficulty in prioritizing the 2016 peace accord amid a broader, unclear security strategy to combat illegal armed groups

Since taking office in August 2022, Gustavo Petro's administration has rolled out its new strategy for peace, titled Paz Total, or Total Peace. This strategy aims to end the violence that has plagued Colombia for decades by brokering simultaneous ceasefires with various armed and criminal groups, offering judicial leniency and other benefits in exchange for permanent disarmament. However, 66 percent of Colombians say that progress on Petro's Total Peace strategy is moving in the wrong direction and 85 percent think Colombia's security situation is worsening, according to a [June poll](#).

The lapsed ceasefires with the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), the AGC, the ELN, and other armed groups highlight the biggest challenge for Total Peace: The government has yet to describe an attractive incentive structure for armed and criminal groups—which reap significant profits and effectively control large portions of the country—to abandon their power

and influence. The worsening violence has continued to erode public confidence in Petro's ambitious approach. The government is now involved in ten sets of peace talks with more than a dozen armed groups, and Bogotá still hopes its talks with the ELN can be revived.

According to the [UN Humanitarian Coordinator](#) report referenced above, 129 possible ceasefire violations were reported in 2023, including humanitarian impacts on the civilian population and offensive actions or armed incidents. The report considers not only the two official ceasefires—those of the ELN and the EMC—but also those declared unilaterally by other groups. Additionally, concerns have been raised about instances where advancing the Total Peace plan may come at the expense of certain commitments established in the 2016 peace accord. For example, the 2016 accord was intended to be the final opportunity for the FARC to surrender

their weapons. However, some observers feel that by moving beyond this framework, President Petro may be creating challenges for the sustainability of both the 2016 peace accord and future accords.

A key factor has been the intensification of violent competition among new and existing illegal armed groups: During Petro's first year in office, intergroup confrontations rose by **85 percent**. Given their power and influence, negotiations with some of these illegal armed groups are needed but are stalling as the government attempts to address the incentive structures of these groups. The ceasefires, when announced, have not yielded clear benefits. Meanwhile, clashes between groups and state forces have continued to disproportionately affect ethnic minorities and marginalized communities in areas most impacted by violence. In this context, the United States and other international partners must continue to pressure the Colombian government on the protections of the rights of local communities who are getting caught in the crossfire in the absence of a local strategy to tackle this.

“The proliferation of armed groups in this region has trapped our communities in the crossfire. Though we are not participants in the conflict, we are suffering its most critical impacts—our movement within our own territories is restricted due to the presence of dominant armed groups, and we fear being mistaken as affiliated with one side or another. Our communities must no longer be targets of this conflict.

Ceasefire violations have left us vulnerable, undermining our access to healthcare, education, economic and social development, and even political stability.”

Ana Milena Hinojoso, Mayor of Atrato

Amid widespread criticism for not delivering on the promise of Total Peace and the slow implementation of the 2016 peace accord, Petro has repeatedly **highlighted** the need for broader reforms (i.e., agrarian, education, health) as mechanisms to accelerate the implementation of the accord. Under the 2023–2026 National Development Plan, Colombia Potencia Mundial de la Vida, the Petro administration has highlighted the importance of fully implementing the peace accord as a key aspect of Colombia's transformation, detailing more than 164 directives. Some of the key issues include the creation of the National System for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, the strengthening of the multipurpose registry,⁸ financing for the peace accord's Land Fund, strengthening citizen oversight, creating the National Reincorporation System and the Comprehensive Reincorporation Program, and reforming the National Drug Policy and the Victims' Law.

However, while little progress has been witnessed overall, two notable achievements regarding Colombia's “institutionality for peace” are worth highlighting. First, Law 2272/2022 establishes a policy called Para la Paz Total y la Seguridad Humana, which includes the implementation of the 2016 peace accord and strengthens the institutions responsible for its execution. Second, the Peace Accord Implementation Unit (UIAP) was created by decree and operates under the office of the High Commissioner for Peace, facilitating new approaches and dialogue processes with illegal armed groups. Yet, the UIAP has faced numerous challenges so far, as it is responsible for advising, coordinating, supporting, monitoring, and verifying the implementation of the accord, and has little capacity to do so.

Additionally, the newly created Ministry of Equality and Equity has had little impact on accord implementation efforts despite the fact that the government tasked it with addressing the accord's gender and ethnic approaches. The Constitutional Court invalidated the law creating the Ministry of Equality—led by Vice President Francia Márquez—and deferred its decision for two years, allowing the ministry to operate until 2026. As of **September 2024**, only 13 percent of the ethnic chapter's stipulations and 22 percent of the gender approach stipulations have been implemented. While these changes could potentially drive progress, the government's failure to achieve tangible results in the Total Peace strategy and the 2016 accord remains an important concern.

8 A register of property showing the extent, value, and ownership of land for taxation.



A drone view shows a coca plantation at a village built by Colombian rebel group Segunda Marquetalia, in Colombia's Pacific jungle
Source: REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

A lack of progress in the crop substitution programs that were launched as part of the accord

The rollout of Petro's ten-year National Drug Policy in November 2023 represents a shift from past administrations' respective approaches to counternarcotics. The approach fully centers on efforts to generate greater pressure on financial structures of organized crime, as well as generating incentives for small coca-producing farmers in geographically isolated areas to replace their illicit crops with legal ones. The Petro administration has also eliminated all forms of "forced eradication," except for coca plots classified as industrial plantations, reversing decades of Colombian counternarcotics policy that was coordinated with and extensively supported by the United States. In a practical matter, there are still no clear criteria on the identification and monitoring of industrial plantations, meaning that little eradication is taking place. According to the latest UNODC survey, cocaine production in Colombia surged by 53 percent in 2023. The increase was explained by the continued concentration of coca cultivation in areas with the highest productivity across all three stages of its production—cultivation, extraction, and processing—enabling a single

hectare of coca to yield up to twice as much cocaine as it did 11 years ago. Additionally, the area dedicated to coca cultivation also expanded in 2023, increasing by 10% from 230,000 to 253,000 hectares. This growth, however, represents a slower rate compared to the previous year, which saw a 13% rise in coca plantations.

Coca prices have **plummeted**, and some analysts attribute the decline in prices to a variety of factors including persistent conflict in cultivation areas, which creates uncertainty and deters buyers; the saturation of drug smuggling routes out of Colombia, as evidenced by high seizures; and the oversupply and rapid growth of coca cultivation. Cartels also have altered their purchasing strategies, opting to buy counternarcotics closer to trafficking routes and from fewer locations. This shift has negatively impacted coca farmers in areas such as Putumayo. However, the **UNODC** notes that while Colombian cocaine prices have plummeted, global prices remain stable, and the drug is reaching new markets. A **kilogram** of cocaine

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can sell for up to \$25,000 in the United States, \$35,000 in Europe, \$50,000 in Asia, and \$100,000 in Australia, making it an extremely profitable and vibrant business, able to adapt to changes in supply, transport, and demand. Instead of attributing the decline in coca prices to oversupply, the UNODC points to a lack of consistent market controls as the main issue. This has led to a volatile market characterized by uncertainty.

Given stable cocaine prices in the global market, low coca leaf prices in Colombia lead drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) from Mexico, Europe, and other parts of the world to see the region and Colombia specifically as an area of opportunity, given the greater profit margins resulting from low coca prices and cultivation costs. While synthetic drug production, illegal mining, arms trafficking, and human trafficking contribute to the diversified operations of criminal businesses, and earned billions for transnational criminal organizations in 2023, cocaine remained the **principal driver** of criminal evolution and earnings, and must therefore remain a priority as enshrined in the 2016 peace accord.

A logical starting point should be Colombia's Comprehensive National Crop Substitution Program (Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos, or PNIS), which was born out of the 2016 peace accord with the goal of reducing the amount of coca crops in the country through substitution programs. The program has been **lagging** significantly, due to the lack of communication and follow-through from previous governments with communities in coca-growing areas, as well as insufficient budget allocation and operational capacities. The Colombian Congress has also shared concerns about the lack of progress in program implementation, amid media reports that only **5 percent** of the budget allocated to the program

was actually disbursed in 2023. The Petro administration has responded by appointing new directors of both the PNIS and the overall Paz Total programs this year, but concerns remain. Considering the lack of demonstrated progress on key aspects of the PNIS, the Kroc Institute cautions that the commitments at the minimum level of implementation risk not being completed by the deadline set in the final accord.

The current national government's drug policy outlines its willingness to move forward with the PNIS, which consists of making payments of 36 million pesos—about \$9,000—to persons who agree to eradicate their coca plantations. However, the government's commitments to productive projects that define how this money will be used by families remains **undefined**. Only **10.8 percent** of PNIS families with ethnic affiliation and 7.5 percent of the ethnic families with woman heads of household have benefited from the program. Despite these lags in implementation, the Territorial Renewal Agency (ART), through the Special Consultation Mechanism (MEC), has provided technical training to ethnic communities related to project formulation and management with private companies. Given the complex realities of coca-growing areas in Colombia, where criminal groups have strengthened their presence over the last year, it seems unlikely that even these subsidies will bring about lasting change unless there are secure conditions in the territories to do it, and unless the government defines a comprehensive and implementable set of programs to transition PNIS beneficiaries to the licit economy. Currently, there are 70,000 beneficiaries of the PNIS program, while the total number of coca growers in Colombia is estimated at 400,000. Thus, for the PNIS to continue effectively, its transition would need to encompass all coca growers across the country and be flexible enough to be consistently updated.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Prioritize the implementation of the ethnic chapter of the accord and its ethnic focus throughout, in coordination with peace negotiations and local ceasefires, to curb existing violence in isolated regions with predominantly Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and vulnerable populations including victims from the armed conflict.

Addressing the implementation of the 2016 peace accord's ethnic chapter requires a fundamental overhaul of state presence and citizen security nationwide through strengthened police and justice systems in conflict-prone areas. Without such a transformation, Colombia risks slipping back into the turmoil experienced between the 1980s and the 2000s.

The ethnic chapter and approach of the 2016 peace accord is lagging significantly, compared to overall accord implementation. Significant **obstacles** such as the absence of ethnic approach mainstreaming in planning and programmatic work, the slow implementation of security guarantees for ethnic communities, and the lack of application of prior consultation for ethnic

peoples have hindered its implementation. As of **September 2024**, 13 percent of the eighty ethnic approach stipulations had yet to reach the stage of implementation initiation, while 61 percent were at a minimal level, 14 percent were at an intermediate level, and only 13 percent were completed. Similarly, the commitments in the final accord's ethnic chapter reflect this slow trend as well, with 15 percent of stipulations not initiated, 62 percent showing minimal progress, 15 percent at an intermediate level, and only 8 percent completed. This is concerning, particularly given that close to **20 percent** of victims from the armed conflict belong to ethnic minority communities and regions, with Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations facing heightened impacts from clashes between rival illegal armed groups. The enduring conflict in regions predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities, particularly Afro-Colombians, is intrinsically linked to cross-sectional inequality within Colombian society. The unwillingness of successive governments to acknowledge and address these realities have thus generated a disconnect between the marginalized communities and the rest of Colombia—a critical factor that perpetuates conflict.



Police officers play with children from indigenous families who take refuge in La Casa Indígena, after being displaced from their lands due to clashes between illegal armed groups in their territories, in Riohacha, Colombia. Source: REUTERS/Antonio Cascio

To address this issue, the Petro administration has tasked Vice President Márquez (who also serves as minister of equality and equity) with overseeing and coordinating the ethnic chapter and approach implementation. Last November, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, Raizal, Palenquero, and Rom communities, alongside the national government and others, renewed their commitment through a **pact** aimed at advancing effective implementation of the ethnic chapter. Slight **progress** was seen in commitments linked to the ethnic approach within the PNIS, completion of prior consultation processes for land registry in ethnic territories, and the establishment of a budget tracker dedicated to ethnic minority community funding. However, important challenges persist, particularly in conducting consultations and reaching accords with these communities, due to the lengthy, complex nature of the consultative process, resource constraints, and the lack of confidence of vulnerable populations in government efforts. The presence of illegal armed groups in Afro-Colombian and other predominantly ethnic minority communities have impeded both government efforts and effective implementation of projects in affected areas.

Similarly, the international community, especially the United States, must continue to steadfastly support Colombia's peace process. This entails providing sustained technical, political, and financial assistance to prevent fragmented implementation of the accord. Long-term financial and technical support should be prioritized for the Special High-Level Forum with Ethnic Peoples (IEANPE), the primary consultative, representative, and

liaison body of the Commission for Monitoring, Promoting, and Verifying the Implementation of the Final Agreement (CSIVI). The IEANPE has focused on improving the implementation of the ethnic approach and promoting the ethnic chapter's pedagogy at the territorial level. It participated in the Pact for the Ethnic Chapter and led sessions to deepen understanding and gather inputs for reports on the implementation of the ethnic approach. Although Petro's government allocated a portion of its implementation budget to the IEANPE in 2023 for the first time since the accord was signed, it is essential that this financial support is diversified, sustainable, and not solely reliant on government funding, which can change rapidly.

Economic development is also a key component needed for the progress of these communities and resource-rich territories. Local leaders and producers should receive the technical knowledge needed to connect their products to broader markets across Colombia and beyond: A best practice that can be applied here is cooperative farming to enhance export capacity by tapping into wholesale buyers. Ensuring financial support and tailored technical programs for local leaders, civil society groups, and grassroots initiatives in these regions will strengthen efforts to expedite the implementation of the ethnic chapter and, consequently, provide economic incentives for local communities to operate in legality at the face of the alternative, ideally creating safer conditions in neglected areas affected by persistent conflict, as well as access to quality public goods including education and health.

“Community development is essential for the effective implementation of the ethnic chapter, as it bolsters the local economy and reinforces legal frameworks. By advancing initiatives such as cooperative agriculture and expanding access to broader markets, this approach fosters economic sustainability and progress in regions impacted by conflict, ensuring improved living conditions and essential services for these communities”

Gessica Vallejo, Mayor of Candelaria

2 Enhance the impact of existing, targeted development programs by increasing resource allocation and leveraging international support and local buy-in to develop targeted strategies to support newly identified conflict-prone and conflict-affected areas in Colombia.

To prevent and address the recurrence of armed conflict in Colombia, it is crucial to provide incentives for development and investment in conflict-affected areas across Colombian territory. During the negotiation of the 2016 peace accord, 170 municipalities were designated as Territorially Focused Development Programs, or PDETs. These programs aim to

transform the Colombian countryside and rural environment by fostering a more equitable relationship between rural and urban areas through increased government presence and investment in conflict-ridden regions. PDETs encompass a variety of development projects, such as the construction of roads and schools, improved access to electricity and critical infrastructure, and enhanced health services. Incentives for investment are provided by the government through tax credits; PDET territories also are part of larger municipal clusters that have been most affected by the conflict, known as ZOMACs (Zones most affected by the armed conflict), which provide similar incentives. Both PDETs and ZOMACs are essential components of

Colombia’s 2016 peace accord, designed to address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable development in vulnerable regions. Despite their significance, their implementation faces numerous challenges.

Funding shortages prevent the adequate rollout of development and infrastructure projects, limiting the scope and impact of PDETs in vulnerable communities. These shortages—paired with institutional weaknesses such as limited capacity, poor coordination among government agencies, and difficulties in ensuring meaningful community participation in the execution and implementation of PDET programs—have led to delays and inefficiencies. The structural inefficiencies that have hindered the progress of PDETs are now compounded by growing security concerns, as ongoing conflicts in certain regions restrict access to communities and obstruct development efforts. Strengthening PDET implementation and closing gaps in prioritization by ensuring equitable distribution of resources and assistance for all initiatives will be essential. In addition, assessing the barriers limiting the activation of ethnic people’s own initiatives and strengthening the MEC’s technical capacities for formulating projects that are likely to be funded by international actors will help close this gap.

With conflict and violence expanding into new territories across Colombia (see table 2), it is essential to utilize real-time data to monitor and analyze the growth of conflict, the presence and expansion of illegal armed groups, and the resilience of institutions in these areas. This data-driven approach will be crucial for shaping comprehensive development strategies and informed security policies. US agencies, such as the US Southern

Command, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and USAID, should play a complementary role by supporting local monitoring and evaluation actors such as the CSIVI and other independent academic institutions to allocate resources more effectively, tailor security operations to local conditions, and direct development initiatives toward regions experiencing increased conflict. Proactively engaging in these efforts can prevent further instability and enhance the overall response to emerging security challenges.

The United States should seize this opportunity to deepen existing support for Colombia in developing new programs and funding lines that strengthen institutional capacities in newly conflict-prone and conflict-affected areas. This could include investing in local governance training, improving resource allocation, and addressing budget disparities to ensure that these regions receive adequate support to confront the evolving threats of crime and insecurity. However, before deploying development funds, it is imperative to engage with and listen to local communities in these newly identified areas. Building trust and understanding local needs through community consultations and advisory boards will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of development programs. In doing so, the United States will not only help to curb the rapid expansion of illegal armed groups—which drive migration northward and erode state authority across Colombia—but also address a significant national security concern that affects its own interests. Supporting Colombia in this way will help foster stability, reinforce democratic governance, and reduce the broader regional security risks posed by transnational criminal organizations.

Table 2: Growth of illegal armed groups in Colombia (2019-2024)

Illegal Armed Group	Data
ELN	56% increase in presence, from 149 municipalities to 232.
ACG	84% increase in presence, from 213 municipalities to 392.
FARC-EP	141% increase in presence, from 124 municipalities to 299.

Source: Defensoría del Pueblo, Gobierno de Colombia

3 Prioritize the implementation of the 2016 peace accord before the 2031 deadline to build stronger national and international support for creating more effective negotiation structures with illegal armed groups in Colombia.

One of the most commonly heard critiques of both the Duque administration and the current Petro administration is the failure to take consistent and concrete steps to implement the 2016 peace accord. When Petro took office, he promised to implement an “Alta Instancia para la Implementación,” a high-level governing body to help coordinate and articulate efforts aimed at fulfilling the implementation of the 2016 accord. This coordination is crucial due to the number of entities and sectors involved. In the National Development Plan, 50 billion pesos (close to \$2.7 billion) were allocated for the implementation of the accord, a budget shared by fifty-four entities that must work together to uphold the comprehensive spirit of the accord.⁹

The responsibility for accelerating the implementation of the accord falls under the Peace Accord Implementation Unit, spearheaded by Gloria Cuartas. Yet the unit has faced heavy criticism for its lack of action and results so far, attributed to inadequate budget execution, poor coordination among government agencies, and, most importantly, the rapid deterioration of security caused by the increased presence of illegal armed groups across the country, as well as declining confidence among demobilized individuals and communities on the ground. However, despite this criticism, the UIAP has a fundamental role. For the government’s security strategy to be effective, it is crucial to ensure that the UIAP is closely engaged in any new talks and that the funds allocated for implementing the peace accord are leveraged effectively as part of these violence prevention strategies.

To ensure the effective implementation of the 2016 peace accord in Colombia, it is crucial that observers, including academic institutions and civil society organizations, provide insights to support Colombian governmental efforts to optimize the utilization of funds that back the accord, ensuring efficient results within a strict timeline. Colombia entered the commitments associated with the 2016 accord already aware that there would be costs, both in terms of finances and government attention; it’s essential, even as the Petro administration works on its initiatives, that accord-related commitments be honored. The 2016 peace accord is a mandate in the Colombian constitution, making it a binding commitment that the current and successive administrations must continue to honor—and takes

precedence over other aspirational commitments in political agendas. Therefore, entities overseeing the accord’s implementation must ensure that the government upholds this commitment, taking full responsibility for its effective execution.

The ongoing armed conflict in Colombia continues to hinder the implementation of the peace accord. While President Petro’s emphasis on negotiation is important, given the diverse range of conflicts across the country, his strategy has only yielded mixed results. To enhance the effectiveness of negotiations with illegal armed groups, the government should adopt a multifaceted approach that emphasizes inclusivity, local engagement, and transparency. It is crucial to closely monitor the incentives for armed groups and understand the power dynamics and reasons behind their reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue. The ability to inflict harm gives illegal armed groups a significant bargaining chip, making it also hard for the Colombian state to offer anything that these armed groups want enough to loosen their grip over territories that bring in ample profits.

Negotiations with criminal groups run the risk of undermining the rule of law; therefore, any incentives used must be approached with great caution and ideally supported by a legislative framework passed by democratically elected lawmakers. A well-defined, structured negotiation strategy, rather than an ad hoc approach, is essential. Countries with relevant expertise, such as the United States and Norway, should collaborate with the Colombian government to develop this framework.

4 Support the independence and efficiency of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, an innovative and far-reaching transitional and restorative justice system in Colombia.

The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) is a backbone of Colombia’s 2016 peace accord. Its ability to deliver justice promptly and guarantee legal certainty to those under its jurisdiction is essential for the legitimacy and sustainability of the peace process. Particular attention should be paid to the resolution of the case to grant amnesty and guarantee legal security to demobilized FARC combatants, who were signatories of the accord for political or other relatively minor crimes, as stipulated in the final accord. Even **after seven years**, the overwhelming majority of these individuals still do not have their respective legal situations resolved, despite having administrative amnesties. This is a core commitment of the accord, and failure to follow through might lay ground for resentment and the resurgence of conflict in Colombia.

9



A police officer stands guard while a backhoe removes earth as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Unit for the Search for Disappeared Persons (UBPD) resume the search for the remains of people authorities suspect were killed between 1999 and 2004 by guerrillas and paramilitaries who dumped their bodies amid tons of rubble, in Medellín, Colombia. Source: REUTERS/Juan David Duque

Equally critical is the work of the JEP in advancing all eleven “macro cases” that it has taken on. The failure to resolve even one of these macro cases, now eight years after the signing of the accord, has damaged the credibility of the JEP and shaped public opinion about it. This is compounded by the JEP’s decision to include—and thereby protect from normal judicial processing—high-profile individuals whose cases were not intended to be treated in this manner. Both of these issues—one an error of omission (failure to resolve macro cases) and the other an error of commission (including Salvatore Mancuso, a Colombian paramilitary leader who once was second in command of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and other paramilitary leaders)—have undermined public confidence in the JEP.

To ensure the success of the peace process, it is vital that US agencies work alongside the Colombian government to support effective implementation and ensure the participation of both victims and perpetrators in restorative justice mechanisms. It is essential that the JEP, under its jurisdiction, make progress in holding accountable those responsible for the gravest crimes

committed in the Colombian armed conflict, eight years after the accord was signed. It is also vital that US agencies work alongside the Colombian government to ensure effective implementation and support for victims and perpetrators’ participation in restorative justice mechanisms. Strengthening the strategy for communication and participation of ethnic peoples in all cases, but especially [Case 09](#), will help ensure the conditions necessary for their participation in judicial proceedings to have a reparation-oriented purpose. This includes providing for culturally specific measures, such as guaranteeing interpretation during hearings and translation of essential court documents, for communities still using their native languages. It is of the utmost importance to strengthen mechanisms for coordination across cases so that the most serious and representative acts perpetrated during the armed conflict are held accountable before the JEP and that sanctions are closely related to the harm caused. Reparation under the JEP is collective and symbolic. Importantly, it is not solely the JEP’s responsibility to deliver reparations; the Colombian state and its judicial institutions also play a crucial role.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION

The implementation of the 2016 peace accord requires political will, broader coordination, and consistent technical assistance. The persisting conflict in Colombia requires attention and a coordinated strategy that places the 2016 peace accord at its core. Tides are changing in the region, as illegal armed groups and organized crime groups are thinking creatively about how to bypass state institutions to expand their illicit empires. Meanwhile, many governments in the region are approaching the problem differently, without a clear strategy in mind. Colombia, however, has a clear roadmap with the 2016 peace accord to help territories prevent the resurgence of conflict and deal with current illegal actors. Partner governments like the United States and European countries have committed to Colombia's security by investing millions of dollars in the peace accord—but Colombia's government needs the political will to prioritize the accord.

Addressing the lagging implementation of the accord will not only result in greater security for Colombia but will also address persistent drivers of violence such as poverty and inequality. The security situation across Colombia is resulting in loss of territories and greater clashes among groups, with citizens getting caught in the crossfire. The expansion of multinational criminal entities also poses a threat to US national security, meaning that more actors across governments, international organizations, business communities, and foundations are motivated to unlock new and innovative ways of support. Leveraging these opportunities will be critical.

But the bottom line is that Colombia needs to continue upholding its part by prioritizing the implementation of the 2016 peace accord and showing tangible results to regain its legitimacy in the fight against organized crime.

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ABOUT THE US-COLOMBIA ADVISORY GROUP

The Atlantic Council's **US-Colombia Advisory Group**, with Senators Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Bill Hagerty (R-TN), as honorary Co-Chairs, is a nonpartisan, binational, and multi-sectoral group committed to advancing a whole-of-society approach to addressing the most vital policy issues facing the US-Colombia relationship—with a recognition of the broader implications for bilateral interests across the region more broadly.

At its founding in 2017, the Advisory Group was co-chaired by Senators Roy Blunt (R-MO) and Ben Cardin (D-MD). Upon Senator Blunt's retirement, Senator Bill Hagerty (R-TN) assumed the honorary chairmanship alongside Senator Cardin.

Senators Cardin and Hagerty are both members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where, in addition to other assignments, Senator Cardin serves as Chairman and Senator Hagerty as Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on State Department & USAID Management, International Operations,

& Bilateral International Development. The two senators bring additional regional and global expertise to their honorary co-chairmanship: Senator Cardin is a member of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, & Global Women's Issues; and Senator Hagerty is a member of the Subcommittee on East Asia, The Pacific, & International Cybersecurity Policy.

In 2023-2024, the Advisory Group will provide a concrete plan on how to navigate the potential changes in US-Colombia relations. A new administration in Colombia represents a unique opportunity to work with an increasingly diverse set of actors in the public, private, and civil society sectors to deepen US-Colombia economic and diplomatic ties. The Advisory Group will advance concrete recommendations where the United States and Colombia can advance long-lasting peace and socio-economic prosperity that mutually benefits each country.

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