

The search for a negotiated peace in Colombia and the fight against illegal drugs

By **Sandra Borda**

■ Executive summary

The issue of illicit drugs has played a radically different role in the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Havana compared with the peace process in El Caguán ten years ago. There are two differences. Firstly, while in El Caguán President Pastrana aligned himself with the war on drugs as it stood at the time through the design and implementation of Plan Colombia in order to strengthen the state's military apparatus, President Santos has adopted a more revisionist attitude by calling for a global debate intended to produce changes to the current war on drugs. And secondly, in contrast to Pastrana, Santos has chosen not to dwell on claims about the close links between the FARC's insurgent activity and the production and trafficking of illicit drugs. Additionally, the report suggests that these differences are explained by the role the U.S. played in both negotiations: while it was active and crucial in El Caguán, its absence from the Havana talks has been notable, but also rather convenient. This absence, in turn, is explained by the fact that Washington has fewer interests at stake and more limited resources for intervening, at the same time as the Colombian government no longer has an urgent need for aid.

Introduction

Illegal drugs have played a fundamentally different, almost completely opposite role in the ongoing peace talks between the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Havana in comparison with the talks held in El Caguán ten years ago. During the Caguán process the war on drugs served as an instrument that allowed the then-Colombian president, Andrés Pastrana, to prepare an alternative strategy – a Plan B, so to speak – in case the peace process failed (as it ultimately did). The logic of the war on drugs allowed Pastrana's government to develop and use Plan Colombia to modernise the country's armed forces and update their military and intelligence equipment. When the peace talks collapsed, the guerrillas found themselves facing a much stronger military, leading to a significant shift in the balance of military power in favour of the state, which was then consolidated under the Democratic Security policy that was implemented over the course of Alvaro Uribe's two presidential terms. This shift in the balance of power – i.e. the military weakening of the FARC – has led the armed group to develop a more genuine interest in reaching a negotiated settlement in the current context.

During the ongoing peace process both parties have agreed to include the issue of the war on drugs as one of the six points comprising the agenda for the talks. This in itself is a sign that the government is willing and able to implement changes with regard to this topic, otherwise it would not have been included in the agenda for the negotiation. Furthermore, the Santos administration has used the potentially transformative juncture of the peace process to initiate a drastic change in the Colombian government's position in relation to the war on drugs. In fact, before the dialogues were made public, President Santos started an international campaign to discuss the current terms of the global war on drugs. Even though Santos has not committed himself to a specific position in this debate, it is clear that he is not entirely unwilling to consider alternatives to Colombia's historical prohibitionist stance.

For its part, the FARC seems to have assumed a position that is relatively compatible with the government's effort to reform the national and global regime against illegal drugs: in February 2013, also in the context of the peace process, the organisation proposed the legalisation of coca, marijuana and poppy crops. The parties' positions on this issue

thus appear to be moving closer together, which might lead to an important change in Colombia's stance on drug policy in a post-conflict scenario.

The second argument in this report is that this considerable change in the way the war on drugs has been approached in the Havana peace talks compared with El Caguán is explained in part by the radically different role played by the U.S. in the two processes. To be precise, the ability of the U.S. to influence Colombia and its behaviour in connection with the war on drugs has declined considerably. This has given the Colombian government substantial autonomy and room for manoeuvre and it has been able to take advantage of this space to adopt a more flexible position that gives the Santos administration more leeway for negotiations on the subject.

The contrasts are stark. During the talks in El Caguán U.S. State Department officials met with members of the FARC's Secretariat in Costa Rica to express their views about the peace process and the war on drugs. Moreover, Washington worked together with the Colombian government in the design, funding and implementation of Plan Colombia (in fact, the U.S. provided most of the funding for that programme). This took place while the peace process was under way. Washington's role in this process was thus intensive and sometimes decisive.

Today, the U.S. government is absent from the Havana peace talks – and conveniently so. Even though the Obama administration has declared support for President Santos's peace efforts, no U.S. government official has directly participated in the talks and, in sharp contrast to the process in El Caguán, U.S. military aid for the war on drugs has decreased significantly over time.

Thus, a more marginal role for the U.S. in the peace process has helped give the negotiating parties – especially the Colombian government – more leeway to engage in more profound and less restricted discussions about the possibility of changing the country's position on the drug war.

The peace process in El Caguán and Plan Colombia¹

The need to obtain military and economic assistance from the U.S. during the peace process in El Caguán reinforced the Colombian government's belief that subversive groups were deeply involved in illegal drug production and trafficking. The centrality of this idea was crucial in the design of Plan Colombia, and later, when the peace process failed, it allowed the use of an unprecedented amount of resources to fight the insurgency. Hence, to understand the role the war against illegal drugs played during the peace process in El Caguán, it is necessary to explain the process through which the U.S. government participated in these negotia-

tions; the nature of its participation; and how this participation changed over time, from the beginning and until the very end of negotiations.

In his inaugural address Pastrana mentioned his analysis of the relationship between illegal drug production and trafficking and the Colombian armed conflict. This formula was the most important framing resource his administration used in order to increase U.S. involvement in the effort to end the war against the guerrillas:

drug crops are a social problem and its solution requires ending the armed conflict ... developed countries have to help us implement a sort of "Marshall Plan" for Colombia; a plan that allows us to develop large investments in social programs, in the agricultural sector and in regional infrastructure, just to offer our peasants different alternatives to illegal crops (Pastrana, 2005: 51).²

In order to implement a strategy to facilitate U.S. involvement in the peace process, a comprehensive approach to both U.S. Democrats and Republicans was necessary to prevent the subjection of the policy toward Colombia to the comings and goings of U.S. domestic politics. Bill Clinton, the president at the time, promised to work with Congress to increase anti-narcotics assistance, aid for sustainable economic development, human rights protection and humanitarian activities. He also promised to help stimulate private investment and join other donors and international financial institutions to promote economic growth in Colombia (Pastrana, 2005). Meanwhile, the Colombian government was successfully selling the "counter-narcotic plus counter-subversive" frame to top officials of the U.S. Congress: the government's argument was that an efficient war against illegal drugs could not and should not be separated from a strategy to end the armed conflict. Benjamin Gilman, at the time the chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, subscribed to the following thesis:

If the guerrillas are involved in drug trafficking, we are not going to draw a line and say that "these" guerrillas are rebels fighting for the revolution, and that "these other" guerrillas are involved in drug trafficking. If they are involved in drug trafficking we are going to treat them all the same way If they are producing and protecting drug traffickers and helping them to take all the supply out of Colombia, we will support the police's efforts to stop them (*Revista Semana*, 1998).

Both the Colombian government and the U.S. Embassy in Colombia repeatedly insisted on the fact that drug traffickers and insurgents were virtually indistinguishable, which made it very difficult to channel U.S. assistance, since U.S. legislation at that time still forbade military aid for counter

¹ This section draws in part from Borda (2012).

² Quotations from Spanish documents have been translated by the present author.

insurgency purposes. On this issue a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) document also stated that “new guidelines have been created to share information, starting in March 1999. The increasing guerrilla participation in drug trafficking is recognised and for this reason intelligence information is being supplied to counterinsurgency efforts in areas where drugs are produced” (*Revista Semana*, 1999).

In sum, due to the Colombian lobby and the GAO’s report, Washington realised that it was not a good idea for the U.S. to distance itself too much from the peace process. More importantly, it realised that limiting counternarcotics aid to Colombia in the *zona de despeje*, where the talks were taking place, was a self-defeating strategy. With this in mind, Thomas Pickering, under-secretary of state for political affairs, travelled to Bogotá at the end of the summer, met with President Pastrana and, to the president’s great surprise, offered the possibility of U.S. support not for one year, but for the three years left of Pastrana’s term. According to Pastrana, Pickering’s proposal was an almost perfect match for his idea of a “Marshall Plan” for Colombia (Pastrana, 2005). After this visit the Colombian president and his staff started to work on a more elaborate and detailed version of Plan Colombia that would include Washington’s initiative.

During Pastrana’s second visit to President Clinton it was already clear that U.S. assistance was mainly intended to strengthen the Colombian military in order to force the guerrillas to negotiate or, in case negotiations failed, to provide the government with a Plan B to deal with the insurgency: “it was also rather apparent that the decision (to ‘cautiously reengage’ the Colombian military by supplying it with sophisticated weapons) was made because the Colombian armed forces were losing the war with the guerrillas” (Ruiz, 2001: 65). The social components of the aid package became of secondary importance. Pastrana understood that the guerrillas would eventually become stronger during the peace process, and the government could not afford not to modernise its military apparatus and lose more ground in its war on drugs.

As part of the “counter-narcotics plus counter-insurgent” frame that his administration was promoting, Pastrana’s concrete proposal was to try to involve the armed forces more actively in the war against drugs. The idea was to secure resources to modernise and update the Colombian armed forces with U.S. funding. Traditionally, U.S. assistance was given to the police – the institution in charge of the war on drugs – rather than the military.

On December 19th 1998 President Pastrana presented Plan Colombia as “an alliance ... with the countries of the world and with the private sector to fight for peace, for human rights, for social rights and ecology, and as a group of foreign investment projects strategic for peace” (Pastrana, 2005: 118). In spite of this rhetoric, Plan Colombia was an instrument to modernise and strengthen

the Colombian army and “to create new army brigades specialised in the war against drugs, brigades that would now be able to receive military aid from the United States” (Pastrana, 2005: 119). The Colombian government presented a plan that asked for \$2,500 million from the international community.

The government realised that the approval of Plan Colombia in the U.S. Congress was a priority and would require additional efforts. With this in mind it implemented a broad and expensive lobbying campaign in order to convince the Republican opposition of the advantages of Plan Colombia and obtain the necessary resources. On January 11th 2000 Clinton formally announced his aid package to Colombia for the following three years. The plan’s final objectives were to send resources and equipment to two anti-narcotics brigades operating in the south of Colombia, to support aerial interdiction operations in Colombia and neighbouring countries, to improve the justice system and promote human rights, and to strengthen the rule of law and alternative economic development in Colombia. By June 2000 the U.S. Congress had approved a military and humanitarian aid package of \$1,043.7 million, a sum slightly lower than the one for \$1,336.9 million previously approved by the House of Representatives in March 2000. It was the largest U.S. aid package to Colombia in history: 68% was dedicated to military and police assistance, while 32% was dedicated to social and justice programmes, human rights and alternative development.

Once George Bush took office as U.S. president the Colombian government began to work on arranging a meeting with the new U.S. leader in order to renew support for Plan Colombia. The first Bush-Pastrana summit took place in February 2001, and on September 11th of that same year the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington took place. On February 20th 2002, during the last year of Pastrana’s administration, peace talks with the FARC ended with no concrete results.

At the end of his administration, and using an argument in terms of which Colombia’s conflict was linked to the new international war on terrorism (Moreno, 2002), Pastrana convinced the U.S. government to lift the restrictions imposed on military co-operation to allow its use not only for the war against drugs, but also in the war against the insurgency. A bill was introduced by the U.S. executive stating that

in fiscal year 2002, funds available to the Department of State for assistance to the government of Colombia shall be available to support a unified campaign against narcotics trafficking, against activities by organizations designated as terrorist organizations such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and to take

actions to protect human health and welfare in emergency circumstances, including undertaking rescue operations (House of Representatives, 2002: 39).

President Alvaro Uribe thus inherited a strong alliance between Washington and Bogotá, one that would not only contribute to Colombia's war against drugs, but, more importantly, would facilitate military efforts against the insurgency.

Havana and the Santos government's policy shift on illicit drugs

Within the context of the current peace process in Havana, the Colombian government has attempted to follow a new approach to the drug issue, both at the negotiating table and beyond it. President Santos has changed the traditional position of the Colombian government, which had previously followed a prohibitionist approach to the war on drugs, and replaced it with one characterised by greater openness to debating different strategies for dealing with this problem. Even though Santos has not advocated a specific policy, he has insisted on the need to hold an open debate about the dominant global strategy and its clear shortcomings. This change in the government's position has been facilitated by the relatively marginal role played by the U.S. in the Havana peace process and by that country's diminished influence over Colombia as a result of the cuts in military and economic aid from Washington to Bogotá for the war on drugs and counterinsurgency activities.

Santos' campaign started with a speech before the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2010 when for the first time the president spoke about the need to revise and redefine the current terms of the war against drugs. Santos expressed concern about the contradictions of the war on drugs and called for the start of a thorough review of the global strategy on the matter:

We note with concern the contradictions of some countries that, on the one hand, demand a frontal fight against drug trafficking and, on the other, legalise consumption or study the possibility of legalising the production and trade of certain drugs These contradictions make it a necessity ... to come to an agreement and to review the global strategy against illicit drugs in order to agree on a unique global policy that is more effective and within which all countries will contribute equally to this effort (Santos, 2010).

In November 2011 Santos gave interviews to various media outlets in Britain and spoke once more about his idea of leading a global discussion about what he called a failed global strategy against illegal narcotics. *The Observer* reported that President Santos's voice was "becoming the key one in trying to set the terms for a new international discussion about the war" and highlighted his pronouncements about the world's need to discuss new approaches, given that

we are basically still thinking within the same framework as we have done for the last 40 years A new approach should try and take away the violent profit that comes with drug trafficking If that means legalising, and the world thinks that's the solution, I will welcome it. I'm not against it (Mulholland, 2011).

Santos's proposal in this context was precisely to assume leadership and launch a discussion about the topic, but he made clear that he was not willing to pay the high political cost of assuming and advancing a concrete position. On the contrary, the Colombian government would only change its position on drug policy in the event of an international consensus:

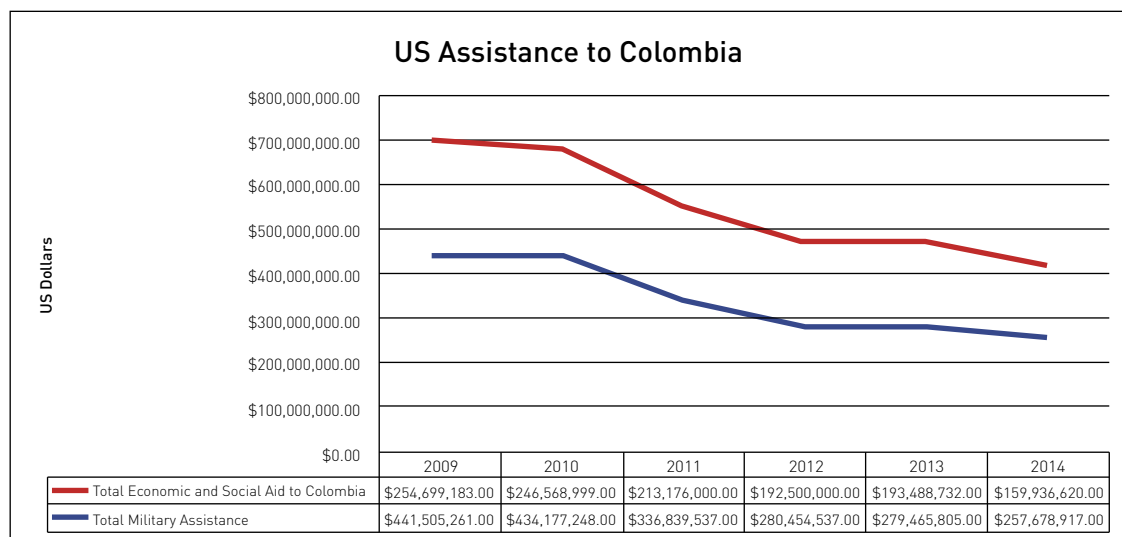
What I won't do is to become the vanguard of that movement because then I will be crucified. But I would gladly participate in those discussions because we are the country that's still suffering most and have suffered most historically with the high consumption of the UK, the US, and Europe in general ... I would talk about legalising marijuana and more than just marijuana. If the world thinks that this is the correct approach ... I would never legalise very hard drugs like morphine or heroin because in fact they are suicidal drugs. I might consider legalising cocaine if there is a world consensus because this drug has affected us most here in Colombia. I don't know what is more harmful, cocaine or marijuana. That's a health discussion. But again, only if there is a consensus (Mulholland, 2011).

In April 2012 these declarations were followed by Santos's proposal at the Summit of the Americas to form an Organisation of American States (OAS) special committee to analyse the hemispheric war against drugs and propose new venues for action. The OAS secretary general made public the content of this report very recently and it is expected to initiate a debate at least within the hemisphere (OAS, 2012). Although this report was meant to be discussed at the 43rd Regular Session of the OAS General Assembly in Antigua, Guatemala, in June 2013, President Santos – the leading promoter of the drafting of the report – excused himself from attending the meeting. The discussion began, but almost no significant changes to the hemisphere's approach to the war on drugs were agreed upon.

Also as part of this strategy, Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala proposed a joint UN declaration requesting governments to start a discussion about this issue. These governments did not mention legalisation as an option (and neither has the Colombian government elsewhere), but they insisted on the need to start a broad discussion that would eventually lead to deep reforms to the current narcotics regime.

The shift in the Colombian government's position has been made possible by the decline in U.S. influence over Colombia. In fact, there has been no public reaction on the

Figure 1: U.S. assistance to Colombia, 2009-14



Note: Some figures for 2013 and 2014 are estimates.
 Source: <<http://justf.org>>

part of the U.S. government following President Santos's various international statements, nor has there been any negative impact on the two countries' bilateral relations, at least publicly. This recent phenomenon is explained by two different, but complementary factors: firstly, due in part to the post-2008 financial crisis, the U.S. cannot afford to continue supporting Colombia's military efforts. In fact, military support has been constantly decreasing since 2009, as Figure 1 shows. Consequently, the U.S.'s ability to shape or influence Santos's position and activism on this topic has been severely undermined.

Secondly, Bogotá has not been able to keep framing Colombia's conflict in a way that would interest Washington and attract its military co-operation. At the end of the Pastrana administration (2002) and just months before President Uribe took office, Colombia's ambassador in Washington, Luis Alberto Moreno, promoted a strategy of linkage politics in terms of which Colombia's conflict was directly linked to the U.S. war on terror. By doing so Colombia was in a better position to obtain military assistance from the U.S. Moreno stated the government's new position and spelled out its function within the broader counterinsurgency framework:

While the United States' attention is fixed on fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Asia, a grave threat lurks in the Americas. Colombia is the leading theater of operations for terrorists in the Western Hemisphere. Under the false pretense of a civil war, Colombian guerrilla groups have ravaged the nation with violence financed by cocaine consumers in the United States. The Bush administration, appropriately, is pushing in Congress to have anti-narcotics aid expanded to strengthen Colombia's ability to defeat terrorists (Moreno, 2002).

However, this scenario has changed dramatically. The Obama administration's take on the war on terror is more

focused than it was under former president Bush and Obama has no intention to expand or extend it (Baker, 2013; Dreyfuss, 2013). This hinders Colombia's intention to frame its civil strife as part of the global war against terrorism and, consequently, makes it more difficult to obtain military and economic resources from the U.S. This strategy worked for presidents Pastrana and Uribe, but it will not work for President Santos, and his administration is aware of it.

These aspects of the bilateral relation, added to the fact that Colombia and Latin America are not high-priority items on Washington's foreign policy agenda, indicate that U.S. economic and military aid to Colombia is very unlikely to increase in the near future. As a result, it is to be expected that U.S. intervention and participation in the current peace process and influence over the Colombian government will remain minimal.

This new situation has not only led to an important (though not radical) shift in the Colombian government's position on the issue of illicit drugs, but also allowed it to change, slowly but decisively, its official line about the connection between insurgent groups and the production and trafficking of illegal drugs in order to facilitate negotiations in Havana. As noted earlier, during the Pastrana administration, the government was insistent on the close links between the FARC and the illegal drug economy. Pastrana stressed the need to have enough resources to fight drug trafficking and work toward achieving peace by undermining this source of funding for the guerrillas. For this reason, as explained above, it was not a difficult task to convince the U.S. government to lift all restrictions on military aid once the peace talks collapsed so that these resources could be used not only to fight drug production and trafficking, but also for counterinsurgency activities.

In contrast, the current Colombian government has chosen to steer clear of pronouncements about the links between

drug trafficking and subversive groups, and has completely abandoned the use of terms such as “narco-terrorism” and “narco-guerrillas”. Santos has not made any public remarks openly asserting the FARC’s direct involvement with drug trafficking and, at least in public, he maintains that he believes the FARC’s claim that its members are not drug traffickers. Similarly, pronouncements about these links by members of the military or the minister of defence have also become less frequent.

Dropping the “narco-guerrilla” discourse has allowed the government to assume a more proactive attitude in the peace talks and made it possible to publicly invite the FARC to join the government and commit itself to addressing the problem of illegal drugs in Colombia.

The “revisionist” discourse at the international level in connection with the current terms of the war on drugs, along with the abandonment of the strategy that linked the FARC directly with the illicit drugs issue, allows the government to shape the conditions for conducting negotiations on the subject in a less polarising way, which is likely to facilitate speedier discussions. Furthermore, this shift allows the government to win over parts of the electorate and public opinion with more progressive views on this subject, preventing the FARC from attempting to win their support. Cognisant of the government’s strategy, the armed group has insisted on its proposal to

put an end to the policy of criminalisation and persecution, suspend aerial fumigation and other forms of eradication that are producing negative socioenvironmental and economic impacts We must consider plans for legalising some marijuana, poppy, and coca leaf crops for therapeutic and medicinal uses, for industrial use, or for cultural reasons (*El Tiempo*, 2013a).

Although the convergence in the two parties’ positions on the issue of illicit drugs is clear and unprecedented, it will be necessary to wait for discussions on this subject (the fourth item in the five-point agenda for the talks) to take place in order to corroborate whether these apparent coincidences will in fact be translated into concrete agreements on the matter. For now, at the time of writing this report, only one official announcement has been made regarding the central points of agreement on the first agenda item, agrarian reform. This declaration suggests that the “comprehensive rural reform” agreed by the two parties in Havana will be “universally applicable, and its execution prioritises the territories that have been most affected by the conflict, by poverty levels, *by the presence of crops for illicit use* and other illegitimate economies, and with the least institutional presence” (*El Tiempo*, 2013b;

emphasis added). This is the first formal, explicit mention of the drug problem – and its primary component, that of production – in the agreements that have been reached by the negotiating parties so far.

Conclusion

The issue of illicit drugs has played a radically different role in the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC in Havana compared with the peace process in El Caguán ten years ago. There are two fundamental differences. On the one hand, while President Pastrana aligned himself with the war on drugs as it existed at the time through the design and implementation of Plan Colombia in order to strengthen the state’s military apparatus, President Santos has had a more revisionist attitude by calling for a global debate intended to produce deep changes to the processes of the current war on drugs. On the other hand, in contrast to Pastrana, Santos has chosen not to dwell on claims about the close links between the FARC insurgency and the production and trafficking of illicit drugs. These two differences – what I call “international revisionism” – and the lack of explicit remarks about these links have brought the parties at the negotiating table closer together and may amount to the first steps toward a substantial shift in the Colombian government’s official position.

The second argument is that the difference between the two Colombian governments’ positions on drug policy within the context of their talks with the FARC is explained by the equally profound differences in the role played by the U.S. in both negotiations. While the U.S. played an active and crucial role in El Caguán, its absence from the Havana talks has been notable, but also rather convenient. This absence is explained by the fact that Washington has fewer interests at stake and more limited resources for intervening at the same time as the Colombian government no longer has an urgent need for aid.³

The Colombian armed forces are now more efficient and professionalised, and the strategy of jumping on the war on terror bandwagon in order to receive military assistance is no longer effective with the Obama administration. Moreover, Colombia has gone from being seen as a failed state due to its shortcomings in the war on drugs to defining and promoting itself as a success story, as an exporter of know-how for the fight against illegal drugs, and as a moral authority for leading a global debate on the issue.⁴

Bilateral ties are thus looser, and Washington’s influence over Bogotá has become weaker. The Santos administration thus has more leeway and autonomy regarding drug

³ For an interesting description of the context in which Plan Colombia was developed, see Borda et al. (2011).

⁴ Colombia has already shared its know-how in connection to the drug war on several occasions. For instance, in June 2012 it was announced that the Colombian government, along with the U.S., would assist Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to improve their institutions, arguing that “Colombia’s trajectory and experience” after 20 years of “so much progress” make the country a strategic ally for this new type of triangular co-operation [see EFE, 2012]. Former Colombian prosecutor Sara Salazar, who specialised in asset forfeiture, has also served as a consultant to the Salvadoran government in designing El Salvador’s asset forfeiture law [see Vásquez, 2013]. Finally, the most paradigmatic case was that of retired general Oscar Naranjo, former chief of the Colombian National Policy, who was named as a security consultant to Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto.

policy than the Pastrana administration ever did. This has made it possible for Colombia to reformulate its drug policy in a way that may become more consolidated in a post-conflict scenario.

Recommendations

- The negotiating parties should seek to further their convergence with regard to ongoing drug policy discussions. If this trend continues, Colombia might reject or modify its traditional prohibitionist policy and reach a national post-conflict consensus revolving around an anti-drug discourse and strategy based on results and harm reduction rather than dogma.
- The negotiating parties should maintain the same criteria used so far for controlling/containing the participation of international actors in the peace talks. The U.S.'s absence might make it easier for the parties to reach agreement on the issue of illegal drugs when the time comes for addressing this agenda item.
- The negotiating parties should continue to receive input from Colombian civil society and incorporate its contributions into their discussions. This is especially important for the issue of drug policy, because the agreements reached at the negotiating table might lead to changes to the country's position on illegal drugs that would require as much legitimacy and popular support as possible.
- Civil society and non-governmental organisations should seek to lead discussions on the issue and articulate the positions of important groups in order to have a real impact on peace talks. Debates on drug policy in Colombia have mostly taken place at the level of the state, and it is time for social actors to become part of the discussion and increase their ability to influence the agreements reached by the FARC and the national government.
- The government should move forward, not backward, with the international activism and leadership initiated by President Santos on the subject. But it should go beyond its role as promotor of the debate and attempt, along with other countries, to put forward a pragmatic global policy based on the lessons learned so far. The OAS report mentioned earlier could be useful for articulating such a plan.
- The Colombian government should start to think about what the guiding principles of its post-conflict foreign policy will be. One of the key fronts of Colombian international action could be to develop substantial – not just discursive – leadership for changing the international illegal drug policy regime. This may serve as a way to promote a positive role for Colombia in the global arena, leaving behind its history of playing an international role mainly in relation to negative issues.
- The Colombian government should seek to forge alliances with U.S. civil society groups that have helped to pass state ballot measures decriminalising the medical or recreational use of marijuana. It is at the state level, not at the level of the federal government, that the transformation of U.S. drug policy is taking place. For this reason, these groups are strategic allies for working toward changes at the international level.
- Developed countries whose drug policies have been based on public health concerns rather than criminalisation should support Colombia in its attempt to initiate and push forward this global debate. The Colombian government should also seek to connect and establish alliances with these countries.
- International organisations, especially the UN and the OAS, should support the countries promoting this debate on the global war on drugs (including Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala) and consolidate their position as the main venues where unprecedented changes to the international regime on this subject will take place. This is an ideal opportunity to overcome their current crises of inactivity.

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