Colombia as a Case Study for US Foreign Policy

A Strategic Policy Proposal for the United States of America

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Creating and Maintaining non-Binary Strategic Foreign Policy

The foreign policy of the United States of America is in danger of failing to innovate to meet the challenges of a developing, changing, and increasingly competitive world. The growing threat to developing tailored strategic foreign policy has grown from the academic channelization of two basic different schools of thought. These have evolved into binary sets of policies with only the slightest of deviations and nuances. Although some foreign policy language has started to address complexities, conversation is still incredibly stove piped into concepts of isolationism being associated with realism and global engagement with liberalism. The United States grapples with political pressure to cope with domestic problems while, at the same time, facing recent foreign efforts that can, at times, be politically regarded as fruitless expenditures of taxpayer resources. However, the global dynamic continues to become ever more complex as the world and the diverse cultures and interests within it connect. Historians talk about social cycles, and politicians respond to social pressures, but geo-political strategists and policy makers are working to understand shifting global trends and working to come to grips with what appears to be the imminent decline of unipolar U.S. position. Moving forward, the United States needs to do more of what works and less of what has not worked to maintain its status as a global superpower and retain the benefits that position bestows, namely, the owner of the global reserve currency.

U.S. involvement in Afghanistan is now regarded by many as an abject failure. With a total estimated cost of $10.5 Trillion dollars over 48 years (including all financed involvements) and 6,294 American contractor and service member lives lost over 20 years, the U.S. now faces having zero presence in the country and a

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much-reduced presence in the region. The national collective conscience is reeling with the consequences of foreign intervention. However, savvy geo-political strategists and policy makers need to regroup and turn back to what foreign policy has historically worked. As a case study, U.S. support for Colombia and its continued importance to the United States serves as a reminder that just as a "mission accomplished" flag cannot be planted neither so can a complete retrenchment be supported as a reasonable national security strategy.

Colombia—A Vital U.S. National Interest

Access to a stable South America via a sovereign Colombia is a vital national security interest for the United States of America, but the American global priority shift of the last two decades that has stemmed from regional uncertainties in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe has been notable. This, combined with burgeoning American investment capital resources, the increasing lack of competitive advantage of Asian production centers, as well as the demonstrated interest of great power competitors in central and south America, has created an imperative for the United States to integrate into its national security strategy a comprehensive and coherent approach to developing key bilateral partnerships in South America. As a major Caribbean neighbor to the United States in South America and the most closely aligned regional partner, Colombia represents a natural regional strategic partner. Colombia, as the keystone to U.S. hemispheric security should be named as a "Major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Ally" (MNNA), a status that only 17 other countries have worldwide, and potentially be named in the National Security Strategy.[**]

The South and Central American regions have historically languished behind other world markets when it comes to U.S. investment. Since 2006, the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy have largely developed strategic language that punishes Caribbean, and South and Central American nations which have taken actions that negatively affect the national interests of the United States (e.g., Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua). As the United States reaches a tipping point in global priority shift, investment dollars will increasingly be focused on hemispheric nations to reduce supply chain risk as well as production costs.

Just as the US does for other regions of the world; specific nations that represent key strategic security needs and opportunities for the United States should be named as strategic allies, to focus US efforts on resolving remaining barriers to

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investment. This would create a strategy capable of achieving incredible economic efficiencies benefiting the American people as well as enhancing security for the United States of America. This policy proposal paper will focus on Colombia as the keystone to US hemispheric security and opportunity.

With access to both Caribbean/Atlantic as well as the Pacific Ocean shipping lanes, the importance of the geographic location of Colombia cannot be understated. Colombia is imperative to American supply chain resilience. In terms of any future robust Pan American exchange, Colombia holds the same type of geographic central position that Turkey enjoyed in the prime of the Silk Road era. Even when accounting for the geographic challenge presented by its central mountainous Andean region and its historic national focus on its "heartland"—as opposed to its coastal "hinterland"—Colombia represents vast short-term opportunity that would require minimal infrastructure and security investment compared to the economic and security benefits of leveraging the already primed and ready Caribbean region. Over the medium to long term, with moderate diplomatic and security investment, Colombia represents the most consequential hemispheric partner relationship for the United States for the next 30 years.

Naming Colombia as a strategic partner of interest in key policy documents would provide executive focus that will translate into coherent regional strategy development and focus resources for maximum return on investment. The focus will also assist with transparency and efficiency of resources as agencies convert guidance into resource plans. Ultimately, the greatest benefit to naming Colombia as a regional partner will be the synergistic effects of diverse government agency efforts resulting from all agencies being properly resourced.

Colombia—Three Pillars of Strategic Support

Colombia occupies a geographic wedge in the northern tip of South America. It has modest but modern coastal ports on its Caribbean coast that neighbors the US to the south as well as on its Pacific coast to the west. Between those two coastal regions it enjoys navigable waterways that very nearly connect its two maritime borders. Colombia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is measured at over $271 Billion annually and is now a net importer with approximately $40 billion in exports, mostly to the United States, and over $51 Billion in imports. Primary exports include minerals (coal, petroleum, and gold) and agricultural products including coffee, bananas, and flowers. Bilingualism and education levels are generally low, public debt is 82 percent of its G.D.P., national finance is stable—Colombia is the only south American country having never defaulted on a loan, individual tax rates are a mere 1.2 percent on formal individual income, and it has a growing domestic retail technology sector. It is a country of approximately

51 million people, with an additional recent refugee influx estimated at nearly 2 million. In comparison to European nations by population, Colombia is larger than Spain, comparable to Italy, approximately 25-35 percent smaller than France and Germany by population, and larger than every other European nation. In South America it is second in population behind only Brazil. In Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) Colombia exceeds all northern Latin American nations and is 3rd overall in south America behind only Brazil and Argentina. It should be noted however that Colombia's per capita PPP exceeds Brazil's by a significant margin.[1]

The maximum hemispheric benefit to the United States comes from a robust and thriving Colombia as a partner nation. For this to be achieved the US should embark on three pillars of strategic support, (1) social development and sustainability, driven by (2) economic development and investment that stands on the foundation of (3) security and defense assistance. Social development and sustainability are the ultimate indicators of a Colombia that has entered the "virtuous cycle" that characterizes nations with stable inclusive societies that host robust and growing economic systems.[2] Social development and sustainability require an engine of economic development, production, and exchange that generates large middle-class populations which can springboard future innovative generations. Economic development and investment in turn stands on the shoulders of legitimate security and defense institutions whose efforts are centrally directed by the state and reflect the will of the people.[3]

The interdependent aspects of these three development domains necessitates a wholistic strategy which asserts that all three must be developed and can be primarily achieved by naming Colombia as a key regional strategic partner of the American people; something that has not been done since the specified coherent policy effort, motivated and researched by congress in 2006.[4]

Social Development and Sustainability

> I am committed to a bipartisan agenda that promotes our shared prosperity, that contributes toward a durable peace for all Colombians, and that advances our shared vision for a hemisphere that is secure, middle class, and democratic.
>
> -President Joe Biden[5]

Colombia suffers from endemic poverty typical of most South American countries. This effect is amplified by is geographic location and the funneling effect of trade from South America to North America. Goods, services, and people naturally flow through Colombia on their way north where 16 percent of global goods and services are consumed. This creates a zone of contention where domestic and great power competitors see the strategic value in dominating the geographic position. The effect of this drives exploitative social tendencies which incentivize an informal economy that, in turn, denies quality of life indicators that are increasingly becoming socially desired in Colombian society.[6]

Participation in, and expansion of the formal economy is an imperative that cannot be stressed enough. The United States' own development and relatively rapid growth over the last 100+ years was based in large part by an economic inclusivity that rewarded transparent systems and generated public trust. What this indicates is that people in the workforce need formal jobs that comply with national and local regulations, including protections for workers, that provide for a basic standard of living and are not threatened or disincentivized by shifting policies that threaten legal certainty for the businesses and production centers that provide those jobs. "The geo-political timing of this shift is crucial as Colombia has the potential to become a regional and possibly a global production center."[7] [8] [9] [10]

Colombia has a relatively large population of just over 50 million people with a formal economic system primarily based on mineral and agricultural extraction and export. They have also recently experienced displacing growth because of the acceptance of 2 million Venezuelan refugees. Colombia has passed its peak oil production and has committed to gradually stemming coal exports to support greenhouse gas control–of note, 67 percent of energy used in Colombia is renewable. The economic center of gravity is naturally shifting from an "extract and export" model to an "import, produce, and export model."[11] The geo-political timing of this shift is crucial as Colombia has the potential to become a regional and possibly a global production center. Industrial development at this juncture will drive formal employment and basic standard of living improvements for everyday Colombians that would include hot water, home ownership, higher education, and access to basic life improving technologies.

US business investment and operation in Colombia has a direct impact on overall employment, formal employment, and social mobility. There are currently 113 medium-to-large U.S. businesses with operations in Colombia and an additional ten that are considering operations in Colombia pending concerns over legal certainty, infrastructure, and physical security. Of those businesses 96 percent of employees are Colombian local hires and 70 percent of executives in those companies operating in Colombia are also Colombian.[12] With the more recent push to bring production centers out of Asia and closer to home, a term referred to as "nearshoring" increases US business investment in Colombia will directly improve the formal economy and assist the entrance into the "virtuous security cycle."[13] [14]

Economic Development and Investment

"Near-Shoring" is a term that describes the efforts of US businesses to find solutions to one of the recent challenges of dependency on Asian, more specifically Chinese manufacturing, intellectual piracy, government market control and currency manipulation, as well as the subsequent predictable rise in the cost of labor that China has provoked. Shipping routes from Los Angeles to Hong Kong measure an approximate 6,500 nautical miles. This represents enormous shipping costs and a large carbon footprint from spent diesel fuel! Nevertheless, the historically cheap cost of unskilled labor in China and the infrastructure investment by the Chinese Government have made the very long supply chain voyage worth the trip.

The cost-benefit of the current economic realities of doing business with China have changed. Unskilled labor in China now costs on average $5.51 USD an hour and employs roughly 98 million workers. When compared with Colombia we see the trip across the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea is a mere 1,500 nautical miles, less than a quarter of the cost in shipping. Unskilled labor in Colombia sits at a regulated minimum in the formal economy of $2.61 an hour less than half of current labor costs in China for industrial production.[15] The actual figure for cost of labor when allowing for the informal economy in Colombia is much lower. As Colombia fights with the current immigration crisis from Venezuela, the question remaining is how to provide enough work and integrate refugees into the formal economy?

Economic development and investment in Colombia are a key component to achieving a vibrant middle class. Incidentally, economic development and investment in Colombia is also fundamental to US economic interests in the region. Asia, and more specifically China, has been the industrial engines that have powered and supplied US consumption for the last 30 years. China is just beginning to come to grips with a myriad of problems, including but not limited to; years of imbalanced monetary policies, civil unrest, geographical and climate challenges, inability to achieve global confidence as an honest partner, as evidenced by the challenges to the "one belt one road" initiative in Montenegro, and overleveraged public and private enterprises. At present more countries worldwide now conduct more business with China than with the United States, but one place where the reach and depth of commercial commitment to China has not become overwhelming, is in Central America and the northern region of South America.[16] [17] [18] [19] [20]

The United States comprises just three percent of the world's population yet consumes more than 16 percent of the world's goods and services. It is a consuming powerhouse that has recently taken a close second place to China in purchasing power parity yet still consumes, per capita, four times the amount that China consumes.[21 22] China, facing a double cataclysm in the next 20-30 years of demographic decline combined with a banking debt trap must now rapidly achieve global political influence (i.e., control) in order to maintain a position where United States is dependent on Chinese production.[23 24 25 26]

The recent crisis in the Suez Canal that brought global shipping to its knees for nearly three weeks and cost billions of dollars made the United States painfully aware of the weakness of poor supply chain resiliency. It recently caused a group of United States Senators from the foreign relations committee led by the ranking member Senator Marco Rubio, to visit the other big canal that the United States depends upon, in late June 2021. On July 7th after visiting Panama, that bipartisan group of Senators (seven Democrat and six Republican) wrote to President Biden expressing the importance of supporting Colombia, a country that they did not even visit during the trip. The statements and conclusions contained in that series of events are profound. First, the idea that Panama is a vulnerable choke point with key portions controlled by China and second, Colombia is ideally located and is aligned with the United States as a perfect partner to guarantee economic supply chain resilience and exchange with access to both Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean with navigable waterways that could be connected as well as proximate ports that could be connected by rail.[27 28]

While the United States is largely respected in the hemisphere as the global superpower, it is not necessarily embraced by all. In terms geographic position, Colombia touches countries that account for 70 percent of the total continental population of roughly 422 million people. Over the last 30 years Colombia has skillfully managed outspoken support for the United States and at the same time maintained relatively stable and productive political relationships with is neighbors—including Venezuela amid tense social challenges. Further still Colombia offered to accept four thousand additional Afghan refugees in support of the United States efforts to balance national security amid the withdrawal from Afghanistan.[29 30 31]

As the United States reduces economic risk with the continued retrenching policies that have marked the last two decades, the ever-increasing private capital glut looking for investment opportunities will need to find a home.[32 33 34 35 36]The proximity, economic efficiency, and relative stability of Latin America makes Colombia the best new place for investment industrial production and infrastructure investment. By recognizing the importance of Colombia as a regional ally and naming them a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) and potentially focusing the National Security Strategy the US will achieve converging agency efforts to collectively shape the vital strategic environment needed for investment by the American people.[37]

Security and Defense Investment

In no country of the western hemisphere is the threat of extra-hemispheric malign influence more dangerous to the United States National Security than in Colombia. George Freidman previews five pillars of US Grand Strategy.[38] Two of those pillars look south from the United States into the southern border, the Caribbean, and into South America. Colombia, because of its unique geographical location occupies a place in both of those southern focused pillars. Colombia additionally has access to Pacific waters which makes it either an invaluable ally or a dangerous agnostic to US interests. The United States has long respected this position and valued the alliance to which that Colombia has been unceasingly committed.[39]

While Iran and Russia have active military and diplomatic elements in Venezuela and Nicaragua, China exercises preeminent economic influence south of the Northern Andes region and continues to make economic inroads in northern South America. These extra-hemispheric actors have two ways in which they can manipulate and successfully leverage South America to balance against the United States. First, by instigating chaos, instability, and failed governments; and second, by uniting and isolating South American interests in divergence from US interests.[40]

There is a now new imperative for U.S. cooperation with stable neighboring nations, like Colombia, that are actively working to reduce destabilizing activities and groups that advance the strategic goals of those extra-hemispheric actors that run counter to U.S. interests. Convergent and coherent actions by all U.S. agencies in the region need to be focused by prioritizing the interest of the United States in expanding a renewed specific bilateral security and defense partnership with Colombia in the National Security Strategy. This commitment will have profound impacts regionally as other regional countries (e.g., El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) will see the benefit and reward in US partnership and will take policy measures to support US initiatives to achieve the benefits that come with US alignment.[41]

The geographic position of Colombia, although incredibly advantageous does have some negative aspects. Its centralized location and transportation access options make it a prime corridor for the movement of all goods and services from south to north and vis-à-vis. Unfortunately, this also includes illicit contraband, narcotics, and money. This has made it a natural habitat for several armed insurgent groups. While focusing on domestic drug education and rehabilitation programs, the US cannot take its eye off production and trafficking.[42] [43] [44] There is no doubt that the United States has efforts to make within its own borders to curb consumption of illegal drugs. The U.S. has long sought single method solutions to confront the dangers of large-scale domestic drug consumption. To ignore the production and trafficking that is taking place in our Caribbean neighbors in the name of focusing only reactionary treatment of drug use victims is analogous to making no effort to prevent violent crime in the name of investing in the treatment of the victims of those crimes.

The peace accord negotiated with the FARC in 2015 successfully demobilized the political arm of the largest and longest insurgent conflict in the world.[45] [46] However, smaller, and fractured surviving insurgent groups remain, motivated primarily by the economic promise of narcotics production and movement. The activities and coordination of the remaining elements of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) have increased and become more integrated.[47] As pressure from the Colombian military and police elements continue there is strong evidence that these insurgent elements are working to incite public unrest with activity as violent as the burning of a Police station in Bogotá and a recent car bombing in Cucuta and underlined in the social protest movements of 2019 and 2021.[48] When surveyed on quality of life, Colombians enjoy a higher societal feeling of well-being than most developed countries, despite a large wage gap. It is not a large leap to infer insurgent instigation of social unrest, when this same population that claims high levels of well-being then takes to the streets.[49] [50]

Mutual Benefits of MNNA Status***

The United States currently trains on average more than 3000 Colombian military professionals annually.[51] This training effort is largely the credited with the success of Colombian "nation building" that has been driven by the Government of Colombia and facilitated by the *Respice Pullum* or "North Star" partner, the United States. Behind the U.S. focus on Colombia in 2006 that was driven by then Senator Biden in the late 1990s and endorsed in the National Security Strategy of the George W. Bush administration, Colombia experienced a strengthening of their central democratic and governing institutions that ultimately led to the popular support of actions against the primary destabilizing insurgent group of the period, the FARC.[52] The 2015 National Security Strategy demonstrated a sense of mission accomplishment in Colombia and de-prioritized the relationship with it proximate southern neighbor. The effect of this, while not drastic, has been

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noticeable in the resurgent and unifying activities of the fractured narco-trafficking groups mentioned above.[53] [54] [55]

The extreme vetting policies implemented by the United States Armed Forces following an attack on Pensacola Naval Station in 2017 by a Saudi Exchange officer, as well as pre-reform negative incentive "Leahy vetting" policies designed to incentivize positive human rights norms in the Colombian Military are now hampering the ability of the United States to shape the security environment in Colombia. This security environment is essential to establish the economic benefit of "near-shoring" to the American economy. As stated earlier, the concept of U.S. leverage of their close partnership with Colombia to balance against dependence on Chinese production centers is predicated on a foundation of stability, supported by the legs of security and defense.[56]

Under the current obsolete pre-reform policies and restrictions, Colombian tactical units with any report from any source, corroborated or not, of human rights violations cannot be trained, advised, or equipped. The challenge to Leahy vetting is that the Colombian armed forces are an incredible reformed force compared to their most challenging years of the 1990s and vetting has only been shown effective where good reporting is available.[57] There are currently over 100 tactical units in the Colombian Armed forces that have reports of violations previous decades. There is no current member of those units that was a member of those units during that period. Colombia continues a rigorous human rights training regimen at all levels of training and has actively pursued international legitimacy and welcomed external scrutiny in their processes and procedures for nearly 20 years, the average career cycle of a military professional.[58]

By naming Colombia as a MNNA, the United States would retain the positive aspects of the Leahy vetting policies while creating greater flexibility to collaborate and support security operations in the country.**** A large part of these policies no longer reflects the working reality on the ground in Colombia that limit the ability of the U.S. to support and establish a security environment. This policy step would specifically allow for the training, advising and equipping Colombian forces and create a closer, more transparent working relationship of both military forces (22 U.S.C. §2321k—10 U.S.C. §2350a). While simple, there would be a profound reduction of burdensome red tape that is costing the U.S. in their ability to train, advise, and equip Colombian forces. The larger current impact of the status quo is a security environment that inhibits U.S. investment in an area that is one third to one fifth the cost of production centers in China.[59]

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As Colombia aggressively pursues de-mining, counter narcotics operations, and security efforts advocated by the United States it would serve the United States well to enable the legitimate and professionalized forces of Colombia. This positive security building work will in turn stabilize not only the country but, based on the geographic wedge that Colombia occupies, will create a bulwark of security to the region. Furthermore, this security environment will directly benefit the American people as the U.S. economy and supply chain balance against over-dependence on Chinese production centers.

Persistent Questions

There are persistent questions to the stability and future success of Colombia. The Covid 19 Pandemic has had a profound impact on the stability of the country.[60] At one point in 2020 an estimated 10 percent of the population was skipping two meals per day. This kind of stark economic austerity cannot last for long without attracting bad actors willing to take advantage of the crisis for their own ends. The rebound from the pandemic appears all but certain as the GDP grew 17 percent in the last quarter as of the writing of this paper. However, persistent inequalities and an endemic informal economy occludes the full picture of recovery and puts a ceiling on gains to household economies in the country.[61]

The influence of so-called ideological actors is a threat felt not just in Colombia but in the entire region. Recent antagonized social unrest continues to challenge government with balancing the protection of freedoms and maintaining order and the rule of law that in turn protects those sacred human rights.[62] Venezuela operates as a near failed state and in no part of the world is that failure felt more severely than in Colombia. The management of the refugee crisis thus far is a credit to their governance, but persistent social struggles underline that the crisis is still being managed and is far from being completely resolved.

Private U.S. enterprise has major hurdles to overcome as Colombia levies a staggering effective corporate tax rate of 56 percent with a mere 5,000 companies effectively providing all government funding.[63] This high tax rate is combined with regressive tax structures such as oil and gas exports being taxed on gross sales, "value added tax" being charged on infrastructure and industrial machinery that serves to support business but to not in fact demonstrate realized financial added value, and perhaps most regressively the inability to claim costs associated with subcontracted work as an expense. Additionally, the tax laws change on average of every two years which can make investment in the country look incredible risky from an outside perspective.[64] [65] Efforts from groups like ProColombia, the American Chamber of Commerce, and Council of American Companies (C.E.A.) are going a long way to help find solutions to these challenges and Colombia continues to work to offer robust free trade zones and tax incentives in the hopes of overcoming some of these structural tax challenges that threaten economic viability.[66] [67] [68] [69]

Finally, the presidential election of 2022 is casting a very long shadow.[70] With a myriad of candidates, the favorite with just 17 percent of popular support is a former Mayor of Bogotá and former convicted M19 gang member, Gustavo Petro. He stands as a self-proclaimed radical that promises extreme changes and does not enjoy enough support in the government or from the population at large to be an effective executive leader. His apparent presumption of election is perhaps the greatest threat to the relatively strong central institutions that the country currently enjoys. His decidedly anti- U.S. rhetoric further threatens the country and the support that Colombia desperately needs at this critical juncture from their longtime northern ally.

Conclusion

Colombia represents a western hemisphere ally that is undeniably needed by the United States. The country stands as a bulwark against extra-hemispheric influence in the region and stands as a keystone to future US economic prosperity. Its people and its society stand at the cusp of their own transformation, ready to join their own formal economy and enjoy increased personal prosperity, with the right incentives. With a coherent whole of US Government approach, Colombia will achieve that virtuous security cycle and anchor US national security in its close neighborhood. The best initial mechanism to focus this US support is by naming Colombia as a MNNA in the same way that the US has named other valuable partnerships in the past two decades (e.g. Brazil, Argentina, and Japan). As important as any single policy move is the need to prioritize our most vital partners. This will provide incentives to other countries in the region to align policies with US interests that will in turn benefit their countries and their countries' citizenry and in turn, the American people. ❑

Notes

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