

# Europe and the Colombian Conflict

By Sabine Kurtenbach

In recent years, there have been repeated calls (mainly from the United States and Colombia) for the European Union (EU) and its member states to play a greater role in Colombia.<sup>1</sup> While the Colombian government expects Europe to support its policies—for example, by contributing to Plan Colombia during the Pastrana administration (1998 to 2002) and to negotiations with the paramilitaries today—the EU has, in some quarters, been looked to as a counterbalance to growing U.S. involvement in the country. European support for the conflict mediation initiatives of the Contadora group (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama) and of the intraregional San José process between the European Community and Central America during the 1980s are cited as positive examples of constructive European involvement in a region in crisis. But there are important differences between the Central America of the 1980s and Colombia and the Andean region at the beginning of the 21st century. In addition to the absence of a Latin American regional initiative that Europe can support, the international environment has changed profoundly.

The complexity of the Colombian armed conflict is captured neither by old Cold War interpretations nor by newer international conflict paradigms such as failing states or terrorism. This problem of classification is not merely academic, but also frustrates the development of appropriate strategies by internal and external actors. Constructive

engagement in Colombia must be based on a broad international coalition that includes not just Europe and Latin America but also the United States.

The first section of this paper analyzes the main differences in the European and U.S. approaches to the Colombian crisis. The second and third sections discuss the main characteristics of European politics and how Europe has responded to Colombia in the past. Finally, the paper presents recommendations for a higher profile for the EU, and possible areas of transatlantic cooperation, in Colombia.

## **Europe and the United States: Different Perceptions and Priorities**

The Colombian conflict is not just the longest running but also one of the most complex conflicts in the world. Guerrilla groups have been fighting to overthrow the country's political and economic system since the early 1960s. Paramilitary or "self-defense" forces fight these groups, occasionally in alliance with state forces. Windfalls from the drug trade in the 1990s allowed all armed actors to increase their military strength considerably; many politicians and academics both inside and outside Colombia interpreted this as proof that politics had been jettisoned in favor of organized crime. After September 11, 2001, and the collapse of the peace process under President Andrés Pastrana, all non-state armed

*(continued on page 3)*

<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the EU as a collective actor. Differences in the positions of individual member states, the EU Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament are addressed as necessary but not laid out in detail.



INTER-AMERICAN  
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# Andean

Working  
Paper

# Foreword

In 2002, the Inter-American Dialogue launched a working paper series on Colombia. We sought to devote sustained and high-quality attention to what is among the hemisphere's most urgent challenges, looking especially at ways of helping the country move toward greater peace and security. The aim was to stimulate a wider public debate on the complex issues facing key decision makers, actors, and analysts with regard to the Colombian conflict. We offered diagnoses and interpretations of the current situation, as well as ideas for policy prescriptions that could usefully contribute to resolving the country's multiple and deep-seated problems.

The Dialogue has extended the focus of the series to the broader Andean region, encompassing Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, as well as a continuing concern with Colombia. The expanded scope reflects the natural evolution of a Dialogue initiative begun in June 2001—originally known as the Colombia Working Group, and now as the Andean Working Group. The initiative is made up of a select and diverse group of analysts and former policy officials from the Andean region, other Latin American countries, Europe, Canada, and the United States. The working group serves as a core of advisors, a “brain trust” for the Dialogue on the Andes, a central priority for the institution. The group's goal is not necessarily to reach agreement and produce consensus documents. Rather, it is to encourage as much imagination as possible, and generate ideas and proposals that help shape thought and action on Andean challenges in constructive ways.

This paper, written by Sabine Kurtenbach, principal researcher at the *Instituto de Estudios Iberoamericanos* in Hamburg, Germany, reviews the role that Europe has played, and continues to play, regarding Colombia's conflict. Kurtenbach points out the key differences in approach and strategy between Europe and the United States, but emphasizes a set of shared goals. She also identifies the prospects for further convergence and collaboration on policy questions such as human rights, drugs, and social development in the coming period of international support to help Colombia move towards an enduring peace. Kurtenbach's perspective does not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the Inter-American Dialogue.

Since the situation throughout the Andean region is highly dynamic, with events unfolding with unusual velocity, it is nearly inevitable that some of what appears in these papers will seem out of date, overtaken by new developments. Still, the central points and arguments remain relevant, and we hope that a steady production of thoughtful interpretations of what is affecting the region will lead to better insights on the problems and more realistic and effective policy recipes.

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actors were classified as terrorist organizations by both the Colombian government and the European Union. The U.S. State Department already had the main Colombian guerrilla groups—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) on its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations well before 9/11; it added the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) to the list on September 10, 2001. Notwithstanding these common perceptions, however, there are important differences between European and U.S. interpretations of the causes and dynamics of the Colombian conflict. These differences are mainly related to the centrality of drugs and international law.

The production and trade of illegal narcotics is a matter of concern for both the United States and the EU in their respective relations with Colombia. Traditionally, most of Colombia's cocaine has gone to the U.S. market, but Europe's share seems to be increasing, with Spain and the Netherlands being the main entry points. According to the latest *World Drug Report* by the United Nations, 120 metric tons of cocaine were seized in North America in 2002, and 45 metric tons in Western Europe. The main difference between the U.S. and EU responses to this situation is that the former defines drugs as a security threat, while the latter—as exemplified in the December 2003 European Security Strategy (the “Solana Paper”)—does not perceive Colombia's drugs to be a direct threat.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. government sees the illicit drugs industry (mainly cocaine, but also heroin)

as central to the armed conflict in Colombia. This perception dates back to the early 1990s when President George H.W. Bush declared a “war on drugs,” and Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru consequently became the main recipients of U.S. military assistance in Latin America. Moreover, drug consumption and the drug trade are very important issues in the U.S. domestic political debate.

For Europe, on the other hand, the root causes of the Colombian conflict are the high levels of poverty and inequality, and the lack of opportunity for rural youth. The illegal drug trade is seen as just one factor contributing to the country's accelerating violence. At the policy level, drug consumption is viewed as a public health problem; the related criminality is seen as a law enforcement issue.

These differing perceptions translate, not surprisingly, into the development of quite different strategies. Although drugs are really an “intermestic” issue, with international and domestic aspects, U.S. drug policy is based primarily on the externalization of the problem, focusing more on reducing supply than on reducing domestic demand. Fumigation of coca fields is thus a central element of U.S. assistance to Plan Colombia. Colombia is the third largest recipient of U.S. military assistance, which until 2002 was restricted to anti-narcotics efforts. In contrast, the EU favors a long-term approach of demand reduction, voluntary eradication, and alternative production. The EU does not have a Colombia-specific strategy to combat drugs but rather a regional approach that includes all Andean countries.

“The EU does not have a Colombia-specific strategy to combat drugs.”

<sup>2</sup> The European Security Strategy names terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime as major global problems to be addressed. Drugs are mentioned as an aspect of organized crime (which also includes trafficking in women, illegal migrants, and weapons); the main risk attributed to the drug trade is its contribution to the weakening of state structures. Similarly, the new EU Drugs Strategy (2005–12) does not discuss drug use and drug trafficking as an issue of security policy.

**“With regard to Colombia, the United States has been skeptical about the possibility of successful negotiations without complementary military pressure.”**

Both strategies have their strengths and weaknesses, and neither has been convincingly successful on its own, as the persisting high levels of global drug production and consumption show. Although there has been a considerable reduction of the area under coca cultivation in Colombia over the last two to three years, the street price of cocaine in the United States and Europe has remained stable, which seems to indicate that the global market remains intact. This may be due to higher productivity of crops as well as the relocation of production to sites that have not yet been detected.<sup>3</sup>

A second issue related to Colombia that spurs divergent responses from Europe and the United States is the role of international law in foreign policy. Given their long and violent history of war, and their experience with economic and political integration, European countries individually and the EU collectively are ardent proponents of the involvement of multilateral organizations—firmly grounded in international law and institutional mechanisms—to resolve regional and international problems. The dominance of U.S. power and the extent of its engagement across the globe mean that these norms and mechanisms are applied on an individual, case-by-case basis—and are sometimes ignored entirely. Washington’s insistence on immunity for U.S. soldiers before the International Criminal Court is a case in point. With regard to Colombia, this means that the EU favors a negotiated peace over a military strategy, while the United States has been skeptical about the possibility of successful negotiations without complementary military pressure.

These differences in strategies do not just reflect diverging priorities and historical expe-

riences but also a relative difference in power. Although the EU is a key global economic player, it has only recently begun to develop a common military policy. The United States, on the other hand, is the world’s only remaining superpower; it thus can enforce political decisions using military means. As with the two approaches to drugs, it is very difficult to judge which strategy will be successful. While the use of force might show some results in the short run, its long-term sustainability may be questionable.

### **Inside Europe: Diverging Views and Shared Principles**

The EU’s emphasis on international law in foreign relations is informed by the fact that it is not a discrete, coherent state but a union of sovereign states. Although the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has become more institutionalized since it came into existence in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, decision making remains the prerogative of the European Council and member states’ governments. Thus, by definition, the CFSP reflects the minimal consensus. EU member states coordinate their foreign policy through international organizations such as the UN, as well as through regular meetings of country ambassadors. Up to now, European integration has not led to a common foreign policy in the strict sense, but institutionalization of the CFSP has had a coordinating effect in terms of acting as an umbrella of shared principles and norms. Outside the EU, however, the perception of a lack of consistency and coherence lingers—and rightfully, as shown not only by the division within the EU on such issues as Iraq but also by European policies towards Colombia. Still, coordination and harmonization will only increase in the coming years.

<sup>3</sup> This stable market trend has been noted not just by critics of U.S. policy but by a variety of other analysts as well, including in a counter-narcotics police intelligence dossier cited by the Financial Times (July 12, 2004).

This trend will be felt first in regions—such as Latin America—that are not of vital strategic interest to Europe.

While the EU has developed a strategy in its relations with the Andean region in general and Colombia in particular, national differences have been discernible over the last few years due to diverging views and readings of developments in Colombia. The two main points of reference that have informed recent relations between European governments and Colombia are: (1) Plan Colombia and the peace process promoted by former president Pastrana, and (2) the democratic security policy of President Álvaro Uribe.

Plan Colombia, the National Development Strategy of the Pastrana administration, was a US\$7.5 billion program seeking to address some of Colombia's long-standing development problems—such as the weakness of state institutions and their lack of national presence—and to reduce drug cultivation by 50 percent over six years. Pastrana's strategy was twofold from the beginning. While he made a generous offer to the oldest and strongest guerrilla movement, FARC—meeting with its leader, Manuel Marulanda, in the Colombian jungle; conceding a demilitarized, so-called “meeting zone” the size of Switzerland; and beginning talks on the possibility of ending armed conflict—he simultaneously initiated a huge modernization program for the armed forces with the support of the United States and Spain. This two-pronged approach led to a series of ambiguities and misunderstandings.

Although the FARC declared Plan Colombia to be a “plan for war,” the Clinton administration and the conservative Spanish government of José Maria Aznar

(1996 to 2004) made significant contributions to it. On the other hand France and the Scandinavian EU member states took a more critical viewpoint, joining the majority of European governments in criticizing the militarization of drug eradication under Plan Colombia. The European Parliament, despite being dominated by a majority of conservative parliamentarians, took an even firmer stance against the plan.

Nonetheless, most European governments agreed to support the peace process.<sup>4</sup> Some sponsored a joint visit of FARC leaders and government representatives to Europe to showcase the workings of functioning democracies; others (Spain, France, Italy, and Sweden) joined in a “Group of Friends” to facilitate the fragile and complicated process.<sup>4</sup> In January 2002, European ambassadors of the Group of Friends worked closely with the UN special envoy for Colombia, James Lemoyne, in an effort to salvage a peace process on the brink of failure. The hope was that FARC and Colombian government representatives would hold substantive talks in April and implement a ceasefire in August.

Support for the peace process fit clearly within the general guidelines and principles of the CFSP and served as a minimal consensus of all European countries for as long as the Pastrana government continued negotiations with the FARC. This consensus resulted in a €335 million (later increased to €350 million) program that focused on the victims of violence, the launching of so-called “peace laboratories”, and support for an enhanced role for the UN on issues of human rights, refugees and mediation. One of the advantages of this approach was that it was not directly dependent on progress in

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<sup>4</sup> The peace process with the other guerrilla movement, the ELN, was also supported by a Group of Friends. Talks between the ELN and groups representing Colombian civil society were held in Germany in 1998, in Switzerland in 1999–2000, and in Cuba in 2001–02; these did not lead to a major agreement.



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talks between the guerrillas and the government, because its focus was mainly the support and strengthening of civil society.

Overall, then, during the Pastrana administration, U.S. and EU policies were somewhat complementary. Where the main U.S. focus was on military support for strengthening and modernizing Colombian armed forces, European efforts were directed at humanitarian support for the victims of rising violence and diplomatic support to facilitate the peace process. The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the growing criticism of the peace process inside Colombia, influenced both U.S. and European perceptions of the Colombian conflict, although differences in priorities and strategies remained in effect.

When President Pastrana ended the peace negotiations—first with the FARC in February 2002, then with the ELN in June 2002—European governments, under considerable pressure from the Spanish EU presidency, supported the decision, although they continued to call for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. The Colombian government also succeeded in its effort to have the FARC and ELN put on the European list of international terrorist organizations, which the EU established after 9/11. This latter development was significant, because it meant that members of these groups were criminalized: they were not allowed to hold public meetings inside Europe (where the ELN had some support), and their financial assets were frozen.

The May 2002 election of Álvaro Uribe—an outspoken critic of President Pastrana’s peace

process who promised to follow a hard-line policy towards all illegal armed groups—complicated the relationship between Colombia and the EU. Uribe’s strategy of democratic security is based on strengthening the armed forces in order to change the strategic balance and force the guerrilla groups to make meaningful concessions. President Uribe stated his willingness to negotiate with all illegal armed groups so long as they declared a unilateral ceasefire and showed a willingness to end the violence. At the same time, he said that he was not willing to discuss any substantial issues until the members of these armed groups had demobilized and reintegrated into society.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. government welcomed this change in policy both because of the events of September 11, and because critics of the peace process had acquired considerable influence, particularly following the March 1999 murder of three U.S. nongovernmental organization (NGO) members by the FARC. Most EU member states also support Uribe’s goal of strengthening the legitimate forces of the Colombian state. Doubts remain, however, as to whether strengthening the armed forces is in itself sufficient to resolve the conflict. The EU has also criticized the manner in which certain aspects of the democratic security policy have been implemented. With the change of government in Spain in March 2004, the EU position toward Colombia became more consistent. For example, Spain put on hold the sale of tanks—agreed to under the Aznar government—to the Colombian military and has repeatedly called for a strengthening of the rule of law and human rights in Colombia.

<sup>5</sup> Eighty percent of U.S. assistance went to the armed forces and the Colombian police, while 20 percent supported programs targeting human rights and the strengthening of the state (for actual figures, see [www.ciponline.org](http://www.ciponline.org)).

<sup>6</sup> Historically, this approach resembles the elite agreements (*pactos de caballeros*) by which combating factions of the Colombian oligarchy ended the majority of civil wars in the past. The defeated side was granted a minimal form of participation and amnesty after laying down arms. Due to changes in the international system—such as the ratification of various human rights treaties and the existence of the International Criminal Court—it is debatable if this approach can be successful today.

In July 2003, the Colombian government and the AUC signed the Santa Fe de Ralito Agreement, according to which the AUC would demobilize completely by the end of 2005. Like the United States, the EU has serious doubts about the negotiations between the Uribe government and the paramilitary forces in Santa Fe de Ralito; these have been criticized on account of their lack of transparency and of a judicial framework. The Uribe administration tried hard to secure international cooperation for the process, but only the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed to lend its support. As the process moves forward, there is increasing pressure on the EU to become more engaged. The governments of Sweden and the Netherlands have agreed to support the OAS mission, and the EU is reconsidering its policy towards Colombia in light of the December 13, 2004, declaration of the European Council:

A more formal EU involvement could take place through timely political endorsement for the ongoing peace process once the Colombian Government has set out a comprehensive legal framework. In this respect the Council underlined that the European Union would have great difficulty in endorsing the peace talks as long as the illegal armed groups have not ceased hostilities. Following a gradual approach linked to developments on the ground, the Council also expressed its readiness to provide concrete and adequate financial support for the outcome of such talks once a comprehensive strategy concerning concentration, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the members of the illegal armed groups in the society has been defined.

The Colombian government must decide whether it is willing and able to meet these conditions. Recent developments seem to indicate that this will be a difficult process. There are different initiatives under way for development of a legal framework within the Colombian Congress, but no decision has yet been reached. Moreover, violations of the ceasefire by the paramilitaries are widely documented by NGOs and the Colombian government's human rights ombudsman. At the time of this writing, negotiations seem to have reached an impasse, with neither the government nor the paramilitary groups willing to cede any ground.

#### **Issues, Instruments, and Activities of the EU**

Colombia's armed conflict is not at the top of the EU's foreign and security policy agenda. However, beyond its humanitarian implications and the historical good relationship between Europe and Latin America, the conflict is relevant to the EU and its role as a global player. Relations between the EU and Colombia are part of the intraregional agenda with the Community of Andean Nations (CAN). The overwhelming perception within the EU is that all Andean countries confront similar and interrelated problems, albeit with individual differences. And, although national governments of EU member states do have bilateral relations and agendas with Colombia, the EU favors a united regional approach.

This approach is consistent with Europe's conduct of foreign relations. Such an approach was quite successful in Europe's relations with Central America during the 1980s when the San José Process formed part of the conflict resolution strategy. The underlying idea— influenced by Europe's own long and violent history—is that political and economic cooperation and regional integration reduce the potential for conflict and are a necessary basis for development and democratization. Within the Andes, there is a clear preference to inter-

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pret the recent crisis on a country-by-country basis. But, as in Central America during the 1980s, it has become obvious over the last few years that there is a danger that conflict could escalate at the bilateral and regional levels. The most pressing concern has been bilateral relations between Colombia and Venezuela. The underlying potential for escalation was most clearly visible in the tensions over the kidnapping of a Colombian guerrilla commander in Caracas that led to the freezing of bilateral relations.

A central problem of the EU strategy in the Andes is the institutional and political weakness of CAN. The EU has tried to influence and support CAN's regional integration and institutional development over the last decade. In December 2003, CAN and the EU signed a Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement in Rome, under which they jointly agreed on principles including respect for democracy and human rights, promotion of sustainable development, and adherence to the principles of good governance. Both regions want to promote conditions that allow negotiation of an agreement to include free trade through the promotion of social and political stability and the deepening of the regional integration process. The most important incentives for the Andean countries are to strengthen economic cooperation and the opening of the EU market. The new agreement also promotes central principles of EU foreign policy: democracy, peace, sustainable development, and multilateralism.

*Issues for the EU in the Colombian conflict*

Latin America's significance to the EU is based on a common history, shared values, trade, and cooperation in international and multilateral organizations and institutions. Europe is the most important provider of development assistance to Latin America, one of its biggest foreign investors, and one of the most important trading partners for the

region. At the subregional level of the Community of Andean Nations, a series of issues confront the EU and its member countries.

Although the EU does not view drug production and trafficking as major security threats, illicit narcotics are a key issue for the EU in its relations with CAN—and thus with Colombia. The Andean region is the only region in the world with which the EU has held a special high-level dialogue on drugs; this dialogue, which has been in effect since 1995, is based on the presumption of shared responsibility between producer and consumer countries. A regional focus has the advantage of avoiding the so-called “balloon effect”—the shifting of production and trade from one country to another in lieu of reducing production in the whole region. Seven meetings have been held to date, and five agreements have been signed to control the trade of chemical substances that can be rerouted for illicit drug production.

Protection of human rights is another important issue for the EU in Colombia and the CAN region. The EU and many of its member states conduct various programs aimed at supporting the victims of violence (e.g., internally displaced people and refugees) as well as Colombian human rights groups, human rights education, and the fight against impunity. The strengthening of an independent judiciary and the promotion of the rule of law are other central EU activities in the field of human rights. In fact, human rights and law and justice projects made up over 40 percent of the EU's development assistance in 2003. The EU promotes respect for human rights as essential in conflict resolution because it is a mechanism to help victims as well as a means of confidence building among the various actors in the conflict. In El Salvador and Guatemala, a general agreement on human rights and the verification of



its implementation in the field by external actors such as the UN was the first visible step in reducing violence and ending the war. In Colombia, there has been much discussion of a humanitarian agreement in the past few years which has never materialized. Whether recent discussions between the government and the FARC on a humanitarian agreement—facilitated by the Catholic Church and the Swiss embassy—will succeed remains to be seen.

Although the CFSP prioritizes security, the armed conflict in Colombia is not seen as a direct security threat.<sup>7</sup> Public security is viewed as an important basis for economic development and political stability, whereas organized crime and the lack of territorial control by the state fall within the broader challenges mentioned in the EU's Security Strategy. The European view of security emphasizes a broader understanding of human security, which comprises more than just defense issues. This viewpoint is one of the fundamental reasons why a military solution is seen as unrealistic by the EU and most of its member states. Consequently, the EU clearly sees the necessity of strengthening the capacities of the Colombian state. Simultaneously, however—and not as a second step—this must include a strengthening of the rule of law and of programs for social integration and economic development. Although the Colombian and U.S. governments generally share this view, there are important differences over timing and sequencing. The Uribe government holds that pacification is a necessary basis for social development, while the European governments maintain that both must be addressed in concert if the process is to be sustainable.

Colombia is one of the world's leading countries in terms of biodiversity, and it shares a long border with the Amazon region of South America. Environmental protection and sustainable development thus are key issues for EU cooperation with Colombia. The armed conflict has had a direct effect on both the environment and development. Attacks on the country's most significant oil pipeline have done extensive environmental damage, primarily affecting water quality; chemicals used in the production of coca paste have had similarly debilitating effects. The conflict has had indirect environmental impacts as well, such as clearing of rainforest by people displaced by violence. Since most of the conflict is restricted to rural Colombia (although attacks in the urban areas have increased over the last years), it is in these areas that the impact on the economy is greatest, leading to a vicious circle of underdevelopment and violence. Addressing the material causes of the conflict is thus a central objective for European development cooperation.

From a European perspective, the issues at stake are mostly related to long-term problems of uneven development and the fragility of democratic institutions in Colombia. Violence and armed conflict have their roots in Colombian history and—although they are influenced by contemporary political junctures and economic incentives—will not be resolved by short-term military operations alone. Thus, the EU's Country Strategy Paper (2002–06), cites the objective for cooperation as follows: “to help Colombia in its search for peace, a prerequisite to any form of sustainable development.” At the donor meeting in Cartagena in February 2005, the EU presidency confirmed these goals explicitly. Support of Colombian

“**The Uribe government holds that pacification is a necessary basis for social development, while the European governments maintain that both must be addressed in concert if the process is to be sustainable.**”

<sup>7</sup> Neither Colombia nor the Andean Region is mentioned in the European Security Strategy of December 2003.

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efforts for peace, targeting the roots of the conflict, and humanitarian assistance to victims are central responses to this challenge. A consistent strategy must comprise such short- and long-term measures.

#### *Instruments of the EU*

The main instruments of EU foreign policy are civilian, since a common defense policy is only just emerging, and Latin America is an unlikely theater of operation for European military forces. Cooperation could include security sector reform programs, but the main focus will remain on fighting the underdevelopment, poverty, and lack of social integration that are common to all the Andean countries, along with drug production and trafficking, violence, and political instability. What differs among these countries are the specific forms of political and social struggle. Besides emphasizing intraregional cooperation and the promotion of long-term development goals, the EU has tried to influence the development of the armed conflict in Colombia by such means as supporting the presence of international organizations, promoting “islands of civility” in the field, and facilitating dialogue among the various actors in the conflict.

In April 2001, at the meeting of the International Support Group for the Peace Process in Brussels, the EU announced that it would spend around €335 million to finance the first “peace laboratories,” address structural weaknesses that undermine peace, fight human rights abuses, and provide aid to victims of the conflict. The European Commission promised to contribute at least €105 million over the following six years, and member states promised to spend an additional €230 million over three years.

The EU is the main financial supporter of the field office of the UN High Commissioner

for Human Rights in Bogota, which advises the Colombian government on human rights issues and monitors the country’s human rights situation. The reports of the office and of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the annual Geneva Human Rights conference have been crucial in shaping the EU’s perceptions of the development of the armed conflict in Colombia. The EU selected Colombia as a focus country for its program for the promotion of human rights and democratization.

The most important aspect of EU development assistance directly related to the armed conflict is its support for the so-called peace laboratories. In March 2002, a pilot project was initiated in the war-torn Magdalena Medio river valley. Its objectives are to:

- support the implementation of specific agreements among conflict parties at the local level;
- establish zones of peaceful coexistence through the empowerment of local actors and the support of civil actors promoting peace, with the aim of making them less vulnerable vis-à-vis the armed groups; and
- initiate economic and social development through the promotion of alternative development models.

Although this may be seen as a very small and very local contribution,<sup>8</sup> the first peace laboratory in the Magdalena Medio is politically significant. The area has, for decades, been a central theater of the conflict. The FARC and ELN as well as paramilitary groups have tried to control the region, which, as one of the hubs of the Colombian oil industry, is strategically important. The population has consequently come under pressure from all sides. Civil society groups have organized themselves under

<sup>8</sup> Financing of the first peace laboratory is €34.8 million for eight years. In 2004, additional funds were granted for peace laboratories in other regions of Colombia.

the umbrella of the social diocese of the Catholic Church and have succeeded in getting international funds for an integrated development project (Development and Peace Program)—first from the World Bank, and, since 2002, from the EU. Although armed actors and violence have not been vanquished from the region—which is currently dominated by paramilitary groups—the project has contributed to the protection of civil society and community leaders and their organizations. It has also helped empower social organizations. The project is thus making an important contribution to breaking the cycle of violence and reprisal. Whether the initiative can be replicated in other regions where civil society is less organized remains to be seen.

#### **Transatlantic Cooperation in Colombia: Beyond the Differences over Plan Colombia**

Differences in perception and approach notwithstanding, Europe and the United States should be interested in the development of a joint strategy towards Colombia and the Andean Region that goes beyond a de facto division of labor where the United States provides military assistance and the EU supports civil society. Cooperation will not only lead to greater synergy, but is necessary for an integrated approach towards complex armed conflicts that do not fit simplistic paradigms.

Neither the United States nor Europe should underestimate Latin America's significance as a showcase for international cooperation towards the reduction of violence and the promotion of human rights, democracy, good governance, and social integration. Given historical, political, and cultural affinities, the prospects for success in promoting these goals in Latin America are higher than in any other region. If the United States and the EU are unable to promote peace and prosperity here, how can

they credibly advocate these goals elsewhere? Cooperation can thus be profitable for both: The United States could allay long-standing Latin American suspicions of interference in internal affairs, while the EU could show that it is engaged in the region that it is sometimes accused of ignoring in favor of more high-profile regions like the Middle East.

The London Declaration, adopted by the Colombian and donor governments at the July 10, 2003, London Meeting on International Support for Colombia, could be a departure point for this cooperation. The international community<sup>9</sup> agreed on assistance to Colombia within the following guidelines:

- Support for the Colombian government in its effort to cope with the problems of endangered democracy, terrorism, the illegal drug industry, and the violation of human rights and of international humanitarian law, and the humanitarian crisis.
- Agreement on the necessity to base the struggle against violence and criminality on the rule of law, human rights, and international humanitarian law.
- Support for the government of Álvaro Uribe to negotiate with those illegal groups that are willing to seek negotiated solutions.

A strategy for transatlantic cooperation must cover all these aspects and address short-term as well as long-term needs. From a European perspective, central elements would include a regional and global approach to drugs and a consensus on the protection of basic human rights and the enforcement of international humanitarian law.

The problems of drug production and trafficking cannot be solved in and by Colombia alone.

**“Neither the United States nor Europe should underestimate Latin America’s significance as a showcase for international cooperation.”**

<sup>9</sup> The London Meeting on International Support for Colombia was attended by representatives of the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, the EU, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States; as well as of the EU Commission, the UN and its institutions, and several multilateral banks.

**“ Anti-drug efforts must have a global focus that recognizes the co-responsibility of consumer countries. ”**

Anti-drug efforts must have a global focus that recognizes the co-responsibility of consumer countries. Reducing violence in Colombia will depend on the success of a joint effort by producer and consumer countries to slash the profits of the drug trade. While eradication programs may show some results in the short run, a policy sustainable over the long term must integrate the broader issue of rural development. Although Colombia is one of the most urban societies in Latin America, voluntary or forced migration to the cities will not solve the historically unresolved issues of agrarian policy and control over resources and their management. Programs for alternative production and drug substitution—regardless of the level of support they enjoy from external actors—will only succeed if the resulting products are profitable on the world market. Preferential access for these products in U.S. and European markets is an important step, but a general opening of agrarian markets—as discussed in the present World Trade Organization negotiations—is vital to sustainable development. Transatlantic cooperation in this regard is essential not just for Colombia but for other developing countries too, and could be an important contribution to social and political integration.

A fundamental problem in Colombia is the high dependency of the government's strategy on external funds. Since Colombia is not a poor country per se (although 60 percent of its population lives below the poverty line), Colombia's financial base must be substantially broadened. Otherwise, neither the security policy, nor social programs, nor institutional reconstruction can be sustained. This reform could be an important element of transatlantic cooperation, given that the United States and EU are important donors to international financial institutions.

The most pressing issue over the short term is the negotiation process between the Colombian government and the paramilitary

groups. The government has made it clear that any judicial framework agreed on for the demobilization of the paramilitaries will also be applied to other armed groups willing to demobilize. As per the London Declaration, these terms must ensure respect for the rule of law and the protection of human rights in order to secure international support. Paramilitary leaders are currently unwilling to stand trial in either the United States, where they face charges for illicit drug trafficking, or Colombia, where they are additionally accused of committing gross human rights violations. Conditioning the support of the United States, EU, and other international actors such as the UN on an adequate legal framework that ensures a minimum of justice, truth, and reparation is essential for the victims of violence and for the legitimacy of the Colombian state. U.S. and European efforts should thus be directed towards an appropriate law in the short term and, in the medium term, towards its implementation through strengthening the functioning and independence of the Colombian judiciary.

Implementation and verification by the international community of a human rights agreement with armed groups that have not yet demobilized would help the victims and prevent further escalation of violence. It could also serve as a confidence-building measure and, as such, contribute to the success of future negotiations. Transatlantic cooperation to strengthen the rule of law—for example, through the establishment of an independent truth commission—could help overcome suspicions within the Colombian and international human rights community that impunity is an acceptable price to pay for demobilization. Such a commission could be established, with strong international support, before the end of the conflict to play an important role in the protection of civilians and the de-escalation of violence.

A joint U.S.-EU strategy will not develop on its own but will entail much advance planning and discussion by a wide range of foreign policy actors. A critical first step could be a joint commission or task force to discuss agreements (and disagreements) on a more concrete basis. A comprehensive approach in which different actors use their comparative advantages and strengths could be developed from this basis.

### Conclusion

There are important differences between the perceptions of the EU and United States regarding the issues at stake in Colombia; these are rooted in divergent views on drugs and the role of international law. Other factors intensify these differences. Because Colombia is geographically part of the Western Hemisphere, developments there have a more direct impact on the United States (note, for example, the growing migration from Colombia to the United States and the corresponding growth in money transfers—*remesas*—sent from the United States to Colombia) than on Europe. For Europe, Colombia represents the challenge of instituting international norms (human rights, democracy, and political and democratic stability) and multilateral initiatives (intraregional EU-CAN, UN). This should not imply, however, that Europe is not concerned about the more tangible implications of the Colombia question, such as drugs and migration, for example. At the same time, policy options and capabilities vary substantially between the EU and the United States. The EU is still developing the full foreign policy arsenal of an important global player; the United States is—at least for now—the only remaining superpower. While U.S. foreign policy is autonomous, Europe's CFSP remains dependent on intergovernmental consensus, which is often difficult to obtain.

The differences between the United States and Europe with regard to Colombia are less marked at the policy level. Here, differ-

ences mostly involve priorities, timing, and sequencing. U.S. policy in recent years has focused mainly—although not exclusively—on security. Although Europeans agree with the necessity of strengthening the state, most disagree with the overwhelming emphasis on a military approach in Colombia. Europeans would prefer an approach with at least two additional and equally important pillars—social integration and political dialogue.

The prioritization of security by the U.S. and the Colombian government has significant consequences for other policy aspects. Establishing security becomes the precondition for all other approaches; this is evident in the implementation of Uribe's democratic security policy. This sequencing, together with the need for high levels of external funding, raises serious questions about the policy's sustainability. Although an overemphasis on security may lead to the de-legitimization of the Colombian state in the medium term, focusing on the roots and causes of the conflict will, at best, produce results in the long run—albeit while having little short-term impact. A successful strategy must therefore promote both goals concurrently.

Because differences between Europe and the United States involve strategies more than goals, there is a basis from which a coordinated policy can be launched to reduce violence and promote development and stability in Colombia. The central elements of such a policy would include an integrated global strategy against drugs, promotion and enforcement of human rights and humanitarian international law, and an increase in the resource base of the Colombian state to enhance its possibilities for social integration. However, in order for this to happen, the U.S. and European governments must be willing to engage in open, constructive dialogue to overcome their past differences over Colombia.

“The differences between the United States and Europe at the policy level involve priorities, timing, and sequencing.”



## European Documents on CFSP and Cooperation with Colombia and the Andean Region:

European Security Strategy:

[http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/misc/78348.pdf](http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/misc/78348.pdf)

Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement between EU and CAN:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/andean/doc/pdca\\_1203\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/andean/doc/pdca_1203_en.pdf)

Country Strategy Paper (2002–2006) Colombia:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/colombia/csp/](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/colombia/csp/)

Regional Strategy Paper (2002–2006) Andean Region:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/andean/rsp/02\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/andean/rsp/02_06_en.pdf)

EU Drugs Strategy (2005–2012):

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/drugs/docs/strategy\\_05\\_12.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/drugs/docs/strategy_05_12.pdf)

## Inter-American Dialogue Publications on Colombia and the Andean Region

### Working Paper Series

“State, Drug Policy, and Democracy in the Andes,” by Eduardo A. Gamarra. June 2005

“Turning Point in Colombia? A Rapporteur’s Report of the Colombia Working Group,” by Vinay Jawahar. June 2004

“Álvaro Uribe: Dissident,” by Fernando Cepeda Ulloa. August 2003.

“A New Approach: Álvaro Uribe’s Democratic Security Project,” by Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez. July 2003.

“Doing Something’ in Colombia,” by Eduardo Posada Carbó. August 2002.

“The Prospects for Peace in Colombia: Lessons from Recent Experience,” by Rafael Pardo Rueda. July 2002.

“Colombia: Negotiate, But What?” by Joaquín Villalobos. June 2002.

“Reflections on the Colombian Conflict: A Rapporteur’s Report of the Colombia Working Group,” by Daniel Mack and Victoria Wigodsky. June 2002.

### Task Force Report

*Toward Greater Peace and Security in Colombia: Forging a Constructive U.S. Policy.* The Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Inter-American Dialogue. Bob Graham and Brent Scowcroft, Co-Chairs. October 2000.

### Published Testimony

“Colombia’s Security Predicament and Opportunities for Peace: Guidelines for U.S. Policy,” by Michael Shifter. September 1998.

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