

Colombia: Issues for the 118th Congress

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Colombia historically has been a top U.S. ally and close security partner. Colombia's prominence in illegal drug production prompted the United States to forge close counter-drug ties with Colombia and became the basis in 2000 for [Plan Colombia](#), a U.S.-Colombian program focused on counternarcotics and later counterterrorism. Over 22 years, the United States allocated almost \$14 billion to Plan Colombia and its successor strategies, which broadened to focus on human rights, trade, sustainable development, and regional security. These programs—particularly security initiatives—have had support in Congress and across the past five U.S. presidential administrations.

The 118th Congress may assess the extent to which Colombia's current administration under Gustavo Petro, the country's first leftist president, remains committed to the bilateral partnership and long-standing U.S. security goals. Such assessments could influence congressional decisions regarding the amount and type of foreign assistance appropriated for Colombia and whether to attach legislative conditions to such assistance.

New Direction Under President Petro

Some observers anticipated a shift in bilateral relations with the June 2022 [election of Petro](#), a former leftist guerrilla, an opposition legislator for [nearly 20 years](#), and the former mayor of Bogotá. Petro has been an outspoken critic of human rights abuses by Colombia's security forces during the years of close U.S. cooperation under Plan Colombia and its successors.

In his campaign, Petro pledged to fully implement the [2016 peace accord](#) signed with Colombia's largest insurgent and drug-trafficking group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); progress in the peace process had slowed under President Iván Duque (2018-2022). During his first 100 days in office, President Petro criticized the current approach to the drug war, [including a decades-long](#) U.S.-Colombia effort that prioritized eradication and aerial spraying of coca. He also [reestablished diplomatic relations](#) and [reopened the border for trade](#) with neighboring Venezuela after seven years of closures. He opened peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist group, and presently Colombia's largest insurgent threat. Colombia's congress approved Petro's 2023 budget in late 2022 and his four-year [development plan](#) in early May 2023. Such measures are key to funding Petro's ambitious [domestic reforms](#) and implementing his banner "[Total Peace](#)" program—an effort to end violence by remaining insurgent groups and other criminal armed actors and to [restore](#) security to rural areas of Colombia.

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As of early June 2023, Petro's agenda had stalled and his popularity eroded. Efforts to obtain the surrender of Colombia's largest crime groups and negotiations with the ELN and FARC splinter groups had faltered. Contrary to some observers' expectations, violence in the Colombian countryside had [increased](#). During his first year in office, Petro initiated two major cabinet [shakeups](#), endured the [fracture](#) of his multiparty majority coalition, and saw his approval ratings decline to [below 30%](#). These setbacks left observers doubting that Petro's priority [health, labor, and pension reforms](#) would survive intact. Scandals over alleged illegal campaign financing broke in early June 2023, [freezing](#) congressional consideration of Petro's proposed legislation and [calling into question](#) his ability to recoup support.

Issues for Consideration

Congress may examine four areas of prior bilateral cooperation: counternarcotics, peace and human rights, irregular migration, and approaches toward Venezuela.

Counternarcotics. The Biden Administration has embraced what it terms a [“holistic approach”](#) to combat production and trafficking of coca and cocaine, to include promoting rural justice, security, and development and countering money laundering and corruption. In April 2023, Presidents Biden and Petro met at the White House and identified [common approaches](#) to combating illicit drugs—reducing demand through science-based prevention and expanded bilateral cooperation in intelligence sharing and drug interdiction.

Peace and Human Rights. The U.S. government has supported efforts to bring justice and law enforcement to remote areas of Colombia and reduce continued violence and threats to human rights and other activists. The Biden Administration [backs](#) Petro's policy of fulfilling the terms of the 2016 peace accord, including the [accord's ethnic chapter](#) to safeguard the rights of Afro-descendant, Indigenous, and other ethnic Colombians. The effectiveness of Petro's Total Peace program in reducing violence remains uncertain. Some analysts [argue that](#) a patchwork of peace deals or criminal surrenders may fragment existing groups and spur violence between disarming groups and those eager to replace them.

Migration. Colombia [hosts 2.5 million](#) Venezuelan migrants and has granted many of them a decade of temporary protected status. U.S. support for Venezuelans and their host communities in Colombia reached [\\$227 million in FY2022](#). Colombia is also working with the United States to stem northward migrant flows. In April 2023, Colombia, with Panama and the United States, announced a 60-day coordinated enforcement campaign to deter the illicit movement of people from Colombia to Panama through the border-straddling Darién Gap (see [Figure 1](#)). In June 2023, the State Department [announced](#) Colombia would host regional processing centers for lawful migration pathways to enter the United States, with a six-month pilot slated to begin [on June 19](#).

Figure 1. Colombia and the Darién Gap Region



Source: CRS.

Venezuela. Prior Colombian governments' efforts to push for democratic change in Venezuela have been reshaped under Petro. His approach of engagement is reflected in the several visits to Caracas he made to [normalize relations](#) and his promotion of regional efforts to resolve the Venezuelan crises. In April 2023, Petro hosted a [conference to adopt a common approach](#) in which 20 countries, including the United States, participated. Some [analysts](#), however, question Petro's potential role as an unbiased broker.

Issues for Congress

In its FY2024 budget request, the Biden Administration [proposed](#) \$444 million in State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development funding for Colombia. The request focuses on U.S. objectives, such as counternarcotics and migration management, and on joint priorities (e.g., peace accord implementation, forest conservation). The FY2024 request would reduce U.S. assistance by 9.4% from allocated U.S. FY2022 [funding for Colombia](#), including cuts to some law enforcement and narcotics supply control programs. As Congress evaluates the budget request and carries out oversight of U.S. policy toward Colombia, it may examine the Petro administration's policies and the state of U.S.-Colombian cooperation.

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