

The Flawed Drug Policies in Colombia and the United States Today: Using a Sledgehammer When the Compass Has Gone Astray

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The administration of Abelardo de la Espriella has yet to present its drug policy to the country. Instead, announcements have been made primarily involving the use of force where there's overlap of security issues and drug issues, even with a negative impact on national sovereignty, i.e. decisions being made for Colombia from the halls of government in the United States.

This can be explained as a series of consequences that begin to occur due to the Colombian government's unconditional alignment with the U.S. security strategy, and particularly the one called Shield of the Americas.

It was in this context that Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, speaking in Panama City during a meeting of the so-called Americas Counter Cartel Coalition (A3C) last August 14, announced that the government of de la Espriella authorized joint military operations in Colombian territory to fight narcoterrorism. No Colombian authority has formalized the supposed decision. Nonetheless, there are antecedents that raise concerns and questions.

Ecuador has been a pioneer in implementing the plan announced by Secretary Hegseth. The renowned human rights organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) sums up the result of U.S. intervention in three words. It is simply "a dangerous alliance." The reason: both governments have committed serious human rights violations, driven by their insistence on framing their confrontations with organized crime groups as if they were counterterrorism operations. Ecuador and the U.S. have not disclosed many details about the nature of their security cooperation, nor have they reported whether adequate safeguards are in place to prevent human rights violations. Based on an analysis of just three incidents, HRW identified various crimes, including abuses, drone attacks on civilians and civilian property, torture, arbitrary detentions, and disappearances.

According to HRW, the U.S. government and President Noboa's administration in Ecuador must take immediate steps to clarify their roles in three incidents—on land, at sea, and in the air—as well as provide essential details regarding the nature of the alliance, the role of U.S. forces, and what safeguards have been incorporated into their joint operations to guarantee human rights.

Without addressing these requests—and seeking to replicate the Trump administration's security cooperation in Colombia—the head of the U.S. Southern Command, Francis L. Donovan, visited the southwestern part of the country in late August 2026 to formalize the first steps of the renewed bilateral cooperation, prioritizing:

1. Operations along the Colombia-Ecuador border, where the goal is to establish a binational military base, using the city of San Lorenzo as a hub for coordinated actions by the three countries.
2. A surveillance system along the Pacific coast, with a focus on Tumaco, through the installation of radars to monitor maritime cocaine trafficking in that corridor.
3. The rehabilitation of the Colombian air fleet as part of the coalition's actions against the "cartels" — an erratic term applied to armed groups that protect the markets for cocaine paste, as well as the transit routes for processing and international shipments.

The other announcement made by the Colombian government—without specifying strategic goals—relates to the repeal of Resolution 6 of 2015 of the National Narcotics Council, which ordered the suspension of aerial spraying with the herbicide glyphosate. This administrative act (Resolution 006 of 2026) does not immediately give the green light to spraying, as it requires—in accordance with various decisions of the Constitutional Court—that an Environmental Management Plan be submitted to the Environmental Licensing Authority (ANLA); prior consultation processes must be carried out in collective territories and indigenous reserves where the illegal economy of the coca that is to be sprayed exists; and, in general, a process must be followed that guarantees the precautionary principle, given the legal doubts that exist regarding the harmlessness of the herbicide used or any other that may be used.

Additionally, there is the mandate of the 2016 Peace Agreement, which, in addressing the illegal coca economy, establishes a framework that prioritizes solutions agreed upon with communities through voluntary substitution programs.

The problem with announcing coercive actions without a drug policy framework—as has been the case in Colombia thus far—or lacking a political and institutional structure capable of addressing the various levels of this illegal economy, is that it severely harms the most socially vulnerable segments of society.

This is beginning to happen with problematic drug use, a reality reflected in the United States through budget cuts affecting the implementation of harm reduction policies to address high-risk synthetic opioids, as well as prevention, treatment, and statistical tracking at both the local and state levels. And in the case of Colombia, this is reflected in the silence surrounding voluntary eradication programs, crop substitution, and, more generally, the territorial transformations required to ensure sustainability in the absence of illegal economies in regions that have become dependent on them.

These common practices in both the U.S. and Colombia—at least through the first days of September 2026—have become a burden that reveals erratic parallels, yet one that limits the prospects for a genuine drug policy, as it ends up being dominated by a security strategy that

reinterprets the supply-demand relationship—a relationship that has historically underpinned harm reduction policies at both levels of the illegal drug supply chain.

This evidence-free reinterpretation seeks to portray substances such as fentanyl as “weapons of mass destruction” that come in attacks originating from abroad intended to harm U.S. society, carried out by groups now labeled as narco-terrorists. This narrative is used to justify the remilitarization of the war on drugs, now conducted without procedures that are in keeping with international law.

The cost has been very high—not only in terms of human rights but also in terms of institutional chaos, the creation of narratives without evidence, and the disastrous effects of using force as a “silver bullet” to solve problems: 68 attacks on boats resulting in 227 extrajudicial executions, in addition to the figures revealed by the Ecuadorian case.

Additionally, this type of approach raises questions, including the following:

Where does the idea come from that there are drug cartels in Colombia? Why is there silence regarding the rapid growth of Latin American elites’ involvement in drug trafficking through the legal exports of their companies, as is happening, among other places, in Bolivia and Ecuador? How is the strategy to combat money laundering of drug trafficking proceeds being implemented? How are other illegal activities, such as the exploitation of both strategic minerals and precious metals, being addressed? What is the strategy for confronting the mafia structures that control cocaine trafficking to Europe? Who is investigating how urban areas such as Medellín have been shaped into business hubs for transnational criminal organizations? Who is providing them with protection? Why, if the DEA has had agents stationed in Tumaco and the Colombian Pacific region for more than 25 years, is there now concern in Washington about drugs being shipped out via the Pacific ocean—a practice that has been well established for nearly three decades?

The weakening of the justice system and the institutions dedicated to peace and human rights—a process that began with their defunding in Colombia, undermining the enforcement of guarantees of rights, procedures, and decisions; the new administration’s questioning of prior consultation; the failure to acknowledge the socioeconomic, political, and security problems in a wide variety of territories that depend on illegal economies; the assertion that the use of force is the key to resolving complex conflicts—creates a scenario of great uncertainty when it comes to reasonable solutions, and instead opens a Pandora’s box that plunges us back into a humanitarian crisis of massive proportions. If fundamental rights are an obstacle to the security strategy Washington is proposing for the hemisphere, it becomes clear that Peter Thiel, the entrepreneur and founder of Palantier Technologies, meant it when he said ““I no longer

believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." In other words, they don't need a compass either—a big stick is enough to guarantee their freedom.