Ground teams manually destroying coca crops in Colombia. Photo by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Bit by Byte

Rebooting America's Colombia Policy

By Eliot Pence

Colombia is at a critical turning point. Nearly two years after President Duque took power, the country now faces a refugee crisis now bigger than Syria's, an exploding coca production problem, and the return of policy by protest. New technologies like computer vision, artificial intelligence, and autonomy are becoming more common and commercially available, dramatically reducing the cost of managing hard problems like border management, illicit drug production, and wide area surveillance. As the United States evaluates its partnership with Colombia, it would do well to revisit how it leverages technology to advance mutual interests.

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President Duque hit the ground running two years ago when he became president. His charisma and knowledge of Washington and the "multilateral world" gave him a head start, to be sure, but his efforts have borne real fruit: Foreign Direct Investment has risen substantially—more than any other Latin American country. An accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), an armed guerilla group, has been largely stable, if increasingly tenuous. Entrepreneurship and the tech industry—pillars of President Duque's "Economía Naranja"—are now material contributors to growth and domestic demand.[1]

But the accomplishments stand on uneven ground. As *Foreign Policy* notes, the number of Venezuelan refugees is set to surpass the number who have fled Syria—although they have received only 1.5 percent as much international aid.[2] Venezuela's disintegration has put acute pressure on the social and governing system President Duque has sought to build, giving oxygen to the National Liberation Army (ELN), an armed leftist group, and criminal traffickers. A thriving coca development industry also adds to Duque's problems. According to a UN report, Colombia has more land producing coca than ever in its history. Land used to grow coca constitutes an area the size of Los Angeles—and it continues to increase by roughly 20 percent annually.[3]

After fifteen years and $10 billion in counter-narcotic assistance, recent American efforts to assist the Colombians have achieved mixed results. The core of U.S. strategy has been a stop-start transition from countering narcotics in "Plan Colombia," the plan originally conceived of by the Pastrana/Clinton Administrations, to a partnership more focused on peace, reconciliation, and stabilization in "Peace Colombia."[4] These efforts would likely be more successful if the United States incorporated new technological advancements into its strategy in Colombia.

A better approach would be to support the development and dissemination of new technologies and to combine them with rapidly commodified old technologies.

The recent transfer of sixty helicopters to assist the Colombians in stemming the expansion of coca production is a case in point of the inefficiency of the current U.S. approach.[5] In addition to having huge lifetime costs for partner countries, helicopters are an imperfect tool for surveillance and reconnaissance. A better approach would be to support the development and dissemination of new technologies and to combine them with rapidly commodified old technologies, like radar and other means of light detection, for Colombian front-line fighters.

Recent advances in machine learning and satellite imagery make tracking crop production much easier by picking up signatures of crop patterns and chem-ical compounds from satellites. With advancements in lower orbit satellites, buying near real-time imagery can cost less than $10 for specified locations.[6] Managing vast borders or interdicting smugglers is not a human-scale problem. Autonomous drones interlinked with smart, computer vision-enhanced ground sensors can better detect, classify, and coordinate response times to make manned missions effective, efficient, and safer. The lifetime cost of a sophisticated autonomous drone can be up to ten times less than a manned helicopter.[7] Many of these technologies are being used by American security forces already.

American support for the ethical dissemination of next generation technology is increasingly urgent as Chinese companies seek to set global rules on the use of artificial intelligence in facial recognition. News this month that Chinese companies, Dahua and ZTE, are hoping to gain an edge in emerging markets, such as Colombia, by laying the groundwork for AI standards is especially concerning since Chinese investment in Colombia exploded in 2019.[8] This November, Colombia signed a $4 billion deal with Chinese entities and announced its intention to join China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative, which it had previously resisted.[9] Deploying new surveillance technologies in democratic societies is always fraught with ethical and governance considerations, but if the United States doesn't take the lead in deploying these technologies, geopolitical rivals will, weakening US competitiveness and influence.

In a Congressional hearing earlier his year, Admiral Craig Faller regretted the gaps that U.S. forces have in intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) for counter-narcotics: "We mitigate those gaps with different sources of intelligence…[but] we are deficient in our ISR for the counter-narcotics mission.…[and] record cocaine [production in Colombia] is going to mean record drug flows."[10] Ultimately, better ISR enables U.S. partner forces to do more, and allows the United States to spend less. Whatever the next phase of America's relationship with Colombia looks like, it is unlikely to look the same as the past fifteen years. Rather than focusing on the size of the assistance, policy makers should carefully examine what to fund in the first place. ∎

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