Colombian Peace Negotiations: A Critical Juncture for Positive Change?

By Philip K. Abbott

Journal Article | Feb 17 2015 - 3:44pm

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Introduction

Countries that have experienced civil war often suffer greater risk of relapse than countries with no prior history of war. This empirical finding has been uniquely labeled the conflict trap, which is often argued to be a consequence of the destructiveness of conflict.\[^{[i]}\] I would also contend that the country of Colombia has evolved into what can be coined as an intractable conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC).\[^{[ii]}\] This particular social clash has remained unresolved for such a long period of time and at such a high level of intensity and belligerence, that each side views the seemingly rigid position of the other side as a threat to its very existence.\[^{[iii]}\]

Hence, a sense of mistrust and hostility has pervaded the lives of those directly and indirectly involved, overriding their ability to recognize, legitimize, and compromise on any common interests they may actually share.\[^{[iv]}\]

The weight of history explains why the country of Colombia appears stuck in this conundrum. It is remarkable how the legacy of the Spanish crown’s extractive political and economic institutions have endured in Colombia. In contrast, the United States, with the exception of the South, followed a more inclusive direction after independence from Great Britain.\[^{[v]}\] While ongoing peace negotiations could serve as a critical juncture for positive change, reversing Colombia’s calcified outlook of their people will not be an easy task.\[^{[vi]}\]

There should be no presumption that by simply reaching a peace agreement, the FARC will eagerly disarm and demobilize. As a basic condition for the construction of stable and lasting peace, the mechanisms for implementation, verification and ratification must prioritize providing security, eliminating widespread unemployment, reversing a lack of governmental presence in rural areas, dismantling a strong illicit economy, overcoming poor public health and education, building infrastructure to access both internal and external markets, broadening political participation, and decreasing inequality and insecurity.

This essay will further outline the root causes of Colombia’s existing security and development challenges, highlight some of the seemingly repetitive shortcomings in Colombia’s “counterinsurgency” strategies that seem to have done very little in bringing this intractable conflict to a peaceful solution, review the preconditions of a peace accord, and identify some of the unique environmental challenges associated with peace implementation.
Dismantling the Conflict Trap

Colombia appears to be trapped in a vicious circle of war and violence. In nearly two centuries since independence, Colombia has experienced only 47 years of peace. While most political scientists and governments would agree that Colombia has one of the longest standing democracies in Latin America, it does not have inclusive political and economic institutions throughout the country. Remarkably, the extent of continuity between colonial and independent Colombia is still present today. Acknowledging this major obstacle to prosperity for all citizens may help answer the question, “Why does Colombia continue to defy basic solutions to existing social problems?”

While the Spanish monarch had no compunction in setting up extractive political and economic systems in its vast colonies, this is an unacceptable characterization of 21st century democracy. The political and economic institutions in the U.S. South were much the same well after the Civil War. America’s war of succession may have ended one of the bloodiest conflicts of the 19th century; however, it was only after the civil rights movement of the 1960s when extractive political and economic institutions began to crumble. Consequently, the U.S. South entered the 20th century a poor rural society with appallingly low levels of education, limited infrastructure, high levels of social and economic inequality, sub-standard public health conditions, and a questionable judicial system. Uniquely similar to large segments of rural Colombia, this too may be the reason for Colombia’s inability to fully integrate their 47 million citizens.

It is not to suggest that economic and political inclusivism does not exist in Colombia. On the contrary, the country of Colombia does provide security and public services in large urban areas like Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Barranquilla, and Cartagena. However, much like the reluctance to shed extractive institutions in the U.S. South, the situation in rural Colombia is quite different from these large urban centers where few public services exist and lawlessness and insecure property rights are endemic. “Colombia remains a state without sufficient centralization and with far-from-complete authority over all of its territory.”

Instead of a state presence in rural Colombia, alternative groups like the FARC, National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional – ELN) and criminal bands (Bandas Criminales – BACRIM) easily fill the political and economic vacuum in areas often referred to as “ungoverned spaces.” Albeit illicit, these groups offer employment and security through a complex network of illegal markets uniquely connected to legal markets, which often creates the perception to Colombian peasants that violence and hardship occur only when government security forces make an effort to reverse this reality.

This too is where war and politics are deeply intertwined in Colombian history. As such, the political elite have dragged the Colombian people into their partisan battles for state power and bounty, and bequeathed a legacy of violence. Now after decades of insecurity and little socio-economic improvement, a change in the national security strategy is necessary if there is to be any chance of dismantling the conflict trap.

A Revival of Colombia’s “Counterinsurgency” Strategy?

Since the implementation of Plan Patriota in 2004, the Colombian military made major strides in combating the FARC. Despite being down from its peak of over 20,000 guerrillas since 2002, the FARC continues to maintain a strong network of approximately 8,000 guerrillas and 11,000 militia supporters. Like Plan Colombia, this mostly military and drug-eradication-based strategy was clearly not going to lift Colombia from the conflict trap. Even though there were some small-scale successes of hastily arranged crop substitution programs and humanitarian assistance projects, there was little coordination between security forces and civilian agencies. Furthermore, absent more law enforcement and a civilian governance component, it was nearly impossible to hold and develop territory cleared of the FARC. It soon became apparent that Plan Patriota too, would do very little in addressing the fundamental cause of
Colombia’s chronic insurgency and drug-trafficking challenges.\[xii\]

Meanwhile, a new set of strategies began to take shape in Washington, D.C. This change in thinking took place after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. There was suddenly a fresh push to revive counterinsurgency by incorporating development related elements that had been all but abandoned in previous strategies. In addition to labeling FARC and ELN as international terrorists groups, U.S. National Security Strategy started to view “ungoverned spaces” around the world as a national security threat where terrorists could be hiding.\[xiii\] “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones,” declared President Bush in his September 2002 National Security Strategy.\[xiv\] The U.S. Army’s revamped stability operations manual further validated this new strategic outlook. “The greatest threat to our national security comes not in the form of terrorism or ambitious powers, but from fragile states either unable or unwilling to provide for the most basic needs of their people.”\[xv\]

Support for consolidation now became the accepted axis of U.S. aid to Colombia and labeled “Colombian Strategic Development Initiative.” Long derided by Washington policy makers as costly, overly ambitious “nation-building,” this seemingly less military-heavy approach to Colombia’s counterinsurgency efforts would theoretically replace the Plan Colombia framework. Led by the U.S. Assistance for International Development (USAID), this was intended to be a whole-of-government approach for rural development that would integrate defense and development in support of the Colombian National Consolidation Plan (NPC).

The Colombian government began to pursue a new “counterinsurgency” strategy in 2011 in an effort to retake the initiative against the FARC.\[xvi\] Under the direction of Minister of Defense, Juan Carlos Pinzon, Sword of Honor (Espada de Honor in Spanish) became the fourth and most recent developed transformative plan to fight and defeat the FARC.\[xvii\] At the heart of this strategy were Colombian Army-led task forces complemented with Integrated Action Companies (COPAI) to carry out civil affairs, information operations, and interagency programs to bring state presence and consolidation to areas affected by 50 years of conflict.

Although Sword of Honor was labeled the new counterinsurgency strategy, it was for the most part a counterterrorism strategy. In reality, Sword of Honor was never truly optimized for population-centric counterinsurgency. Notwithstanding task force mission statements referencing the importance of population security and development, it soon became widely understood that these task forces were specifically designed to fight FARC in their operational zones, with the stated goal of attacking its organizational structures.\[xviii\] Sword of Honor’s singularly most important success criteria for task force commanders was based on reducing FARC force structure 50 percent by 2014.\[xix\] This was further convoluted by the seemingly independent resolve of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota to harness the majority of resources in order to kill high value insurgents, increase the number of extradition of Colombian drug traffickers to the United States, and enlarge coca field eradication via aerial and manual methods.

The overly enemy-centric strategy employed by both the Colombian military and the United States, again failed to address the very conditions of insurgency. While the military engaged in some rural development projects, they still lacked adequate resourcing for any sustainable effort. Task forces had limited expertise; albeit eager, and no comprehensive plan to transition those efforts to ministerial authorities. They were generally out of synchronization with the larger government consolidation effort.

Moreover, there remains little involvement by government ministries actively taking part in rural development projects. This is further exacerbated by a USAID plan not fully integrated with Sword of Honor security efforts. There is ostensibly little tangible evidence suggesting a whole-of-government effort being coordinated between defense and development.
What is clear, however, is that the dream of a classic military victory over the FARC is simply no longer feasible. In spite of this reality, the Sword of Honor strategy continues to follow the same enemy-centric approach as previous strategies. Interestingly, according to near unanimous opinion by Colombian military officers, municipality and department officials, “the disconnection and isolation of rural Colombia from the central government remains one of the leading contributors to violence and sustained insurgency.” For this reason, to fully optimize Sword of Honor as a counterinsurgency strategy for stability operations, more civilian ownership of state-building in ungoverned spaces is absolutely essential, if a post-conflict implementation plan is to have any chance of success.

Preconditions for a Successful Peace Agreement

Notwithstanding Colombia’s security and development challenges, this is the third attempt by the Colombian government to negotiate peace with the FARC since the 1980s. No previous peace talks have been so thorough in content or have achieved so much. With the government of Cuba acting as host, Norway, Venezuela, and Chile serve as mediators and observers to these talks.

Since being made public in 2012, there has been significant progress, but huge obstacles remain and implementation may prove to be the most arduous phase yet to come. So what is being discussed? The two sides of the conflict are negotiating a mutually agreed upon agenda consisting of six main topics: 1) rural development, 2) political participation, 3) drug trafficking, 4) victims’ rights and reparations, 5) end of conflict, and 6) implementation, verification and ratification of a final peace agreement. All discussion points must be agreed upon before a peace deal can be signed and the implementation process begun.

1. Rural Development. Land reform is the first item on the agenda and perhaps the most contentious. This has always been at the center of the FARC’s struggle. As such, to directly challenge and attempt to change the socio-economic status quo will not be easy. According to 2012 World Bank figures, Colombia is the seventh most unequal country in the world, with inequality levels comparable to those found in Haiti and Angola. And while poverty levels may have dropped, income inequality, which also fuels social tension, has remained virtually unchanged.

In May 2013, a deal was reached during the peace negotiations that would in theory, radically transform rural Colombia. There are provisions for the creation of a Land Bank to reallocate land, especially that which was seized illegally during the fifty-year conflict. Facilitating access to land, confiscating unproductive land, formalizing property rights, stimulating agricultural production, formalizing rural labor, granting credit, and building infrastructure to access markets are all necessary steps. However, this will take time, money, compromise and political commitment.

It is estimated that land expropriated in Colombia by paramilitaries alone are as high as 10 percent of all rural land. This burden does not begin to take into account internally displaced Colombians. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) of the Norwegian Refugee Council, around 10 percent of Colombia’s population, nearly 4.7 million people, remain internally displaced. Any attempt to reverse these conditions, would most likely encounter tenacious opposition from large landowners. Many of these landowners were former paramilitaries who forced peasants and indigenous groups from large tracts of land. Agrarian reform will be further challenged by powerful political opposition. Led by former Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, there are those who vehemently oppose peasant cooperatives and the idea of breaking up large landholdings.

No doubt, the land restitution program and Colombia’s National Consolidation Plan (PNC) will have to navigate an environment that is complex in a best case scenario and outright hostile in a worst case scenario. Although President Santos made these programs the backbone of his regional development and
reform policy, the military continues to be by far the most commonly seen government institution in these ungoverned spaces. The civilian side of government—such as health services, education, agriculture, road-builders, land-titlers, judges, and prosecutors—are lagging far behind.

2. Political Participation. Clausewitz’s famous dictum about war being the continuation of politics by other means appears to have a real resonance in Colombia. Politics in Colombia are a labyrinthine world, where the thread of continuity is the intransigent resistance to democratizing and pluralizing political change and socio-economic reform by key sectors of the Colombian elite.[xxii]

Notwithstanding these deep-rooted challenges, in November 2013, the two sides agreed on a political future for guerrillas, should a peace deal actually come to fruition. Even FARC leader Ivan Marquez called the deal “a step in the right direction to end the conflict and to achieve a real democracy in Colombia.”[xxiii] In theory, this would allow more political room for left-leaning-movements to openly express their concerns about important social problems affecting Colombian society. However, attempts by the left to engage politically on social and economic concerns have been stigmatized as supporters of communists, or worst yet, labeled as terrorist sympathizers. This indeed presents the FARC with a serious dilemma going forward.

Past efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants into Colombian political life came at a high cost. In the 1980s, thousands of Patriotic Union (UP - Union Patriotica) members, the political party in which the FARC sought to engage politically, were ruthlessly hunted down and killed.[xxiv] With vivid memories of these political assassinations and the eventual decline of UP, FARC will insist on security guarantees to freely exercise political opposition. There will be a demand for greater participation by all sectors of society in national, regional and local politics.

Even though there is an agreement for political representation for the most vulnerable populations, the murder and disappearance of these so called left-wing activists has a tragic aura of familiarity in Colombia. What’s more, the FARC-aligned political movement, Patriotic March (MP - Marcha Patriotica),[xxv] also has good reason for concern. Despite President Santos’s call for more “ideological pluralism” within Colombian society, much like UP party members, there are claims by the MP party of assassination attempts against their members and affiliates since gaining legal status in 2013. Because of the MP party’s strong stance to reverse unpopular trade agreements, stabilize food prices, institute land reform, and provide reparations for victims of the armed conflict, the organization has experienced other forms of physical and legal persecution. This treatment is viewed as a betrayal of the political participation terms reached during the November 2013 peace negotiations.

Notwithstanding these aforementioned hindrances, there will be additional obstacles to FARC political participation. Colombia has been subject to the International Criminal Court (ICC) since 2002, as a signatory to the Rome statute. As such, there is an inherent obligation to prosecute war crimes committed after 2009, and crimes against humanity committed since 2002. Consequently, FARC crimes would more than likely fall under these categories and would therefore leave Colombia little choice but to prosecute FARC leaders for war crimes including murder, attacks on civilians, torture, rape, and forcible recruitment of minors.

Additionally, under the ICC, such crimes cannot be pardoned, which makes a blanket amnesty for the FARC nearly impossible. FARC leaders, for their part, have made it clear they will not negotiate peace for prison terms.

3. Drug Trafficking. In May 2014, the government of Colombia and FARC reached a solution to the problem of illicit drugs. The two sides said they would eliminate all illegal production in Colombia should a final peace deal be reached. It is overly optimistic, however, that a final peace agreement could
drastically diminish such a lucrative trade. Given the strong U.S. demand for drugs, a FARC retreat from this illegal world would only seem to create a production and supply vacuum for Mexican cartels or splinter groups to eagerly fill.

While the drug trade continues to evolve, the methods to manage this scourge has changed very little. “We appear to be stuck in “source control,” a counterdrug strategy the United States has been practicing since making cocaine illegal. As Colombia searches for fresh solutions to this problem, the overarching challenge will remain - how to solve the phenomenon of narcotics production and commercialization without generating even greater violence and hardship. “The economic force of the drug trade simply defies governments.” But as suggested by President Santos, even contemplating decriminalization may not be an acceptable short-cut to a long-term solution, despite decades of ineffective law enforcement and an outdated U.S. counterdrug policy. Only through creative thinking will Colombia solve this problem – suppressing drug flows and attacking source zones has not worked thus far.

Closely connected, if land reform is to have a chance of success, spraying coca fields with crop-killing chemicals in rural Colombia can no longer remain the cornerstone to U.S. counterdrug strategy. As we have seen with Plan Colombia, unilateral action can produce occasional short-term results, but has yet to score a long-term victory. Even the estimated $8 billion U.S. investment under Plan Colombia failed to achieve stated outcomes of reducing the production of illicit drugs (cocaine) by 50 percent in six years and also improving security in Colombia by reclaiming control of areas held by illegal armed groups.

4. Rights of Victims. This is one of the most emotionally difficult and visceral issues for the Colombian public and international community. Focusing on the rights of victims brings into question transitional justice and how much impunity or prosecution [to pursue]. Nonetheless, in June 2014, FARC and government negotiators agreed to set up a truth commission to investigate the deaths and human rights violations during five decades of conflict. Both sides admitted to committing human rights violations and agreed that victims have a right to “truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees so that violations will not be repeated.”

However, negotiators are struggling to define who should be considered victims and how to bring perpetrators to justice. Prior to the peace accords, President Santos championed Colombia’s new Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448). Since signing into law on June 10, 2011, an estimated 6.2 million people have already registered as victims of parties to the conflict. A monumental task, this could end up costing the Colombian government in excess of $11 billion U.S. dollars. Nonetheless, viewed as a government priority, this historical opportunity aims to return millions of acres of stolen and abandoned land to internally displaced Colombians and provide reparations – including financial compensation – to victims of human rights violations and infractions of international humanitarian law. A colossal task considering that the total amount of land stolen from Colombian citizens is over 8 million hectares, which equates to 14 percent of Colombia’s national territory, or an area roughly the size of Costa Rica.

Successful implementation of Law 1448 will depend on the Colombian government’s ability to protect displaced communities from the powerful armed groups that vehemently oppose the restitution of these lands. Unfortunately, the ongoing violence makes effective implementation of this law a formidable challenge. Now three years after the Land Restitution Law was enacted, less than 1 percent of Colombia’s 6 million victims of forced displacement have actually acquired titles to their land. To date there have been only 800 court decisions in the land restitution process, which have benefited 2,867 people from rural areas. Moreover, only 50,000 hectares of indigenous land have been returned, benefiting 1,500 people. So while the expectations of farmers, peasants and indigenous to return to their land is high, reality suggests they will continue to confront disappointment, intimidation, and murder.
5. End of Conflict. This calls for a definitive ceasefire and the official end of hostilities between the Colombian government and FARC. A comprehensive and simultaneous process that implies “handing over weapons and the reintegration of FARC into civilian life; economically, socially and politically.” [xxx] Surprisingly, never before had the FARC allowed the issue of them laying down their weapons to be placed on the agenda of peace talks.

If peace talks succeed whereby both parties agree to all six agenda points, what will be different in rural Colombia where the FARC have been the de facto governing body for five-decades? In these large geographical areas, the Colombian government’s presence to provide security and basic services has been virtually nonexistent. If the government does not establish itself as a positive force in these FARC-governed areas, negotiated peace will make little long-term difference. With the likelihood of the Colombian the government reneging on its promises, the FARC could very easily follow a similar demobilization path of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC) back in 2006. Therefore, to preclude FARC guerrillas from demobilizing into splinter groups, the Santos administration must address security guarantees and development concerns in the country’s conflict zones both seriously and convincingly.

6. Implementation, Verification and Ratification. Now for the hard part; peace agreements have to be implementable. Simply signing a peace accord outlining agreed upon sub-goals will not necessarily attract the resources and commitment to enforce them. There is often a false assumption that a formal contract between the Colombian government and FARC will remain binding during the post-agreement phase. Arguably, it is precisely the period immediately after signing of a peace agreement that will present the greatest uncertainty and danger for Colombians. Fraught with risk, uncertainty, and vulnerability, it is also the time when most peace agreements fail. Angola, Somalia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leon are notable examples.

So what makes implementation succeed? Unfortunately, there is very little analytical research on implementing peace agreements. However, there is some empirical data suggesting that “the greater the difficulty of the environment, the greater the likelihood that peace implementation will fail.” [xxxi] Besides, there is no reason to assume that implementation strategies that may have worked in more benign conflict environments such as in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua or Namibia will also work in a much more demanding environment such as Colombia. Simply put, Colombia has complexities that not only hamper the construction of a national peace accord, but also has a socio-political environment that is inherently less conducive to peace implementation.

Within the context of Colombia’s peace agreement, the relative importance of sub-goals (e.g. demobilization, disarmament, reconciliation, political participation, human rights, refugee repatriation, etc.) can be summarized in three important findings.

First, for every sub-goal, expectations must be commensurate with resources and implementation strategies. Without commitment of resources and well-crafted strategies, expectations of sub-goal implementation are simply symbolic statements of little virtue. As seen in the past, this is not a practical means for terminating conflict.

Second, when allocating resources to sub-goals, priority should be given to the demobilization of FARC members and the demilitarization of politics. The transformation of warring guerrillas into a political party, like the Patriotic March, where social grievances can be openly voiced and acted upon in a democratic process is critical. [xxxii]

Finally, Colombia needs to lend caution in setting unreasonable expectations. Long-term outcomes associated with rural development, economic growth, and solutions to the problem of illicit drugs will take
time. Like the U.S. South, these are important performance indicators for long-term success, but enduring change will not happen overnight. Perhaps some short-term goals would be: to end hostilities for a two-year period without reinitiating conflict and to reintegrate FARC into civilian life with uninterrupted political and security guarantees.

Again, will Colombia be able to craft the “right” implementation strategy and muster the necessary resources and political will to finally end the cycle of violence in Colombia?

Challenges of Peace Implementation

Recognizing that some environments are more conducive to peace implementation than others, Colombia appears to fall into the more difficult category. So what makes Colombia a particularly more challenging environment with greater likelihood that peace implementation will fail? There are essentially six conditions that help formulate this conclusion:

1. **Number of Warring Parties.** The difficulty of implementing a peace agreement increases exponentially when there are more than two belligerent groups. In such cases, implementation strategies become less predictable, the balance of power becomes more tenuous, and alliances among belligerents become more fluid. The strong, influential presence of FARC, ELN and BACRIM (former paramilitaries) will make it exceedingly more complicated for implementers to craft solutions that satisfactorily address the unique challenges associated with each of these groups. Colombia is rife with multiple illicit intrigues which in addition to drug-traffickers and former paramilitaries include local politicians, corrupt public servants and members of the state “security” apparatus.

2. **Likelihood of Spoilers.** The presence of spoilers poses another daunting challenge for successful peace implementation. At stake are big issues that affect the lives of millions of Colombians. What kind of peace is being created in Colombia? What kind of democracy? What kind of economic development? And for whom? The sub-goals outlined in Colombia’s peace agreement will likely trigger violent opposition by a myriad of actors who guardedly value the pre-agreement status quo. Potential spoilers are always present in these situations and whether they actually engage in spoiling behavior depends on the existence of opportunity. This is partially true in the case of former President Uribe and his entourage of political disciples.

3. **Centralized Authority.** The lack of state institutions in “ungoverned spaces” will place enormous demands on implementation. In addition to the seemingly insurmountable challenges of bringing security guarantees and development to rural communities, the implementation process must create and build up more than a modicum of legitimacy and state capacity in these conflict zones for enduring peace to have any chance of sustaining itself. Making matters worse, Colombia’s ruling class continues to harbor a profound distaste for centralized power. As a result, the state never truly developed the resources necessary to exercise centralized power over such a massive and problematic territory. And without sufficient government presence over all its land, Colombia remains inherently vulnerable of losing control over its territorial sovereignty.

4. **Disposable Natural Resources.** Peace implementation becomes more complicated when warring parties have seemingly unobstructed access to disposable resources. While Colombian officials estimate that the FARC earn several billion U.S. dollars (USD) annually from cocaine revenues alone, the United Nations’ estimate of USD $350 million annually is probably closer to reality. Of the 350 tons of cocaine produced in Colombia annually, some 200 tons can be traced back to the guerrillas. Easy access to such resources not only provides the FARC with a viable means to continue fighting, it also becomes the reward against which they weigh the benefits of a peace agreement. Not having access to these lucrative resources would exponentially limit the benefit of guerrillas returning to war or simply
splintering off into equally profitable transnational organized crime.

5. **Size of Armed Groups.** The number of guerrillas to be demobilized still matters. Obviously, a larger number of FARC to be demobilized would create greater resource and logistical demands. The associated challenges of verifying and monitoring demobilizations could also overly stress organic capabilities. Empirical data suggests that the task of demobilizing combatants becomes increasingly more difficult when exceeding 50,000. While this is not the case in Colombia, the fact that there are still 4.7 million internally displaced people will add another complex variable to the reintegration process. Moreover, just as dismantling the paramilitaries led to the creation of splinter groups, some demobilized FARC may seek their future alongside other illegal groups.

6. **National Ownership and International Support.** Ultimately, the success of implementation depends on genuine, effective and broad national ownership and responsibility. To some degree, Colombia has an advantage of full national ownership, implying that national actors decide on objectives, policies, strategies, programs and implementation modalities. [xxxix] Also crucial for successful implementation is the willingness of the international community to provide political support and overseas development assistance. While the United States has been Colombia’s most supportive and generous ally, there are clear signs of pulling back from global security demands. This is particularly true with overseas development assistance. With current USAID contracts expiring in less than two years, the future of consolidation will become increasingly more precarious. Similarly unfavorable, just as Colombia seeks to increase “security and development” in their “ungoverned spaces,” Washington is now backing away from their original concept to counter global threats. To that end, unless the United States views Colombia’s peace process as a vital national security interest, it is highly unlikely to inspire the outlay of more than a very modest amount of resources.

**Conclusion**

President Santos’ unanticipated decision to engage the FARC in peace talks represents a positive departure from his hardline predecessor, Alvaro Uribe; but, is it enough to lift Colombia from its conflict trap? A negotiated end to the war would be only one step forward, and a vitally important one given Colombia’s challenging environment and violent history. In the long-term; however, success will be measured by how much progress is made in creating conditions so that inclusive economic and political institutions can finally take root.

Although considered an important short-term objective, simply disarming and demobilizing guerrillas into the same horrific conditions they ostensibly joined the FARC to change could easily engender new violence. Likewise, while the vast experiences in demobilizing the 19th of April Movement (Movimiento 19 de Abril – M-19), the Popular Liberation Army (Ejercito Popular de Liberacion – EPL), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC) offer some valuable lessons, Colombia must recognize that there is no quick, easy, and inexpensive way to successfully transition from conflict to peace.

Clearly, an important first step in ending Colombia’s fifty-year conflict requires a paradigm change in thinking where violence is no longer viewed as an acceptable or necessary vehicle to secure political and economic change. But given the unsuccessful results of previous peace initiatives and recognizing how deep-rooted violence and war has polarized the country into two unequal worlds, makes a positive conclusion difficult to envisage.

So will the third attempt at peace serve as the critical juncture to finally reconcile social differences between these two unequal worlds, or will Colombia remain entrapped in war and violence? While the preconditions for a successful peace agreement are critically important, Colombia’s ability to successfully
incorporate the six environmental conditions, outlined above when designing their implementation strategy, will invariably influence the outcome of the hemisphere’s longest-running armed conflict.

End Notes


[iii] Ibid.


[ix] Ibid.


[xvii] Ibid.


[xix] Ibid.


[xxiv] The Patriotic Union or UP was a leftist Colombian political party. It was founded by the FARC and the Colombian Communist Party in 1985, as part of the peace negotiations that the guerrillas held with the Conservative Belisario Betancur administration. The UP party was subject to political violence from drug lords, paramilitaries and security forces agents during the mid-1980s, leading to its eventual decline, virtual disappearance and extermination.

[xxv] The Marcha Patriótica emerged in early 2012 as the uniting force behind a large if loosely based network of social, political, labor, peasant and agrarian organizations from around the country, at the behest of two old players in Colombian politics: a leftist wing of the Liberals (PLC) and the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC).


[xxvii] Ibid, p. 82.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Geoffrey Ramsey, In Sight Crime, Organized Crime in the Americas: FARC Earns $2.4 to $3.5 Billion from Drugs, October 24, 2012.


About the Author

Philip K. Abbott

Colonel Philip K. Abbott, U.S. Army, is currently the Combating Terrorism Portfolio Manager at the United States Southern Command in Miami, Florida. He received a B.A. from Norwich University, an M.A. from Kansas University, and an M.S. from the National Defense University. He served in various Command & Staff positions in Europe, the Pacific, and worked extensively throughout the Western Hemisphere as a Latin American Foreign Area Officer.

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