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A Security Partnership with Substance

Colombia as a Global Partner of NATO

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Outside the expert community, very few people in Europe are likely to know that Colombia is a global partner of NATO. In fact, the country is even something of a pioneer among NATO's global partners and the cooperation offers concrete benefits to both sides – so concrete that the partnership seems able to withstand President Gustavo Petro's anti-Western rhetoric.

Since 2017, Colombia has been the only country in Latin America to belong to NATO's exclusive circle of global partners. The inclusion of Colombia and other global partners was enabled by the Strategic Concept adopted at the Lisbon Summit in 2010, where the Alliance defined new threats to international security and acknowledged its role as a global security actor. This facilitated new forms of security cooperation with partners worldwide, extending beyond the actual members and the original geographical framework of the defence alliance.

Phases of the Cooperation between NATO and Colombia

During its 75 years of existence, NATO has undergone several phases of strategic development.¹ During the 1950s, the alliance had a purely defensive character for conventional collective defence. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the Alliance developed strategies focused on the nuclear deterrence of the Warsaw Pact. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, the stabilisation of Central and Eastern Europe and NATO enlargement came to the fore. At the latest with the devastating Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the first declaration of *casus foederis* (an alliance defence situation) under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, new, non-conventional threats such as international terrorism became the focus of the Alliance. Following this, key milestones were the Strategic Concept agreed at the Lisbon Summit in 2010, and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This brought alliance defence back to the fore and motivated NATO members to significantly increase their defence spending and agree on the two per cent

target. The Russian invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 has shifted the parameters further and led to an increased military presence on NATO's eastern flank. It has also brought changes to the security environment risk analysis as set out in the new Strategic Concept of Madrid in 2022.

With the Lisbon Strategic Concept of 2010, the Alliance defined itself as a global security actor and opened itself up to security partnerships beyond the circle of its actual members. This laid the foundations for the creation of a global partnership network with key regional players. Today, NATO has a range of partnership formats with some 40 non-member states, including the "global partners" Afghanistan (currently suspended), Australia, Iraq, Japan, Colombia, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan. These partnerships aim to contribute towards peace, stability and security inside and outside NATO territory. They are based on "common values, reciprocity, mutual benefit and mutual respect".² Each partner coordinates with NATO to decide on the speed, scope and focus of the partnership and sets individual goals.

Colombia has traditionally been one of the United States' closest allies on the South American continent. As part of Plan Colombia, agreed in 1999, the US provided extensive economic and military aid in subsequent years to stabilise the country, combat drug trafficking and professionalise the military and police forces. The successful military pushback of the FARC guerrillas (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), which still controlled large swathes of the country at the turn of the millennium and aimed to capture the capital Bogotá, would have been

inconceivable without the funding, equipment and training programmes provided by the US.

On the verge of military defeat and severely decimated, the FARC agreed to enter into peace negotiations that ultimately led to the signing of the peace treaty and the demobilisation of the FARC in 2016 under President Juan Manuel Santos. Although illegal armed groups and guerrillas such as the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and FARC dissidents continued to exist, the dissolution of the key military player in Colombia's internal conflict freed up military, political and economic capacities. President Santos used this to expand and diversify Colombia's foreign relations following a decades-long focus on the domestic threat. At nearly the same time as it joined the global partnership with NATO, Colombia became the third Latin American country after Mexico and Chile to join the OECD. The goal of President Santos was to make Colombia an active member of the international community and anchor it in the community of shared democratic values.

Thanks to its partnership with NATO, Colombia has reported progress in combating corruption in the defence sector.

However, cooperation between NATO and Colombia began much earlier. Back in 2013, an agreement was signed to guarantee the confidentiality of sharing classified and security-related information. While the agreement was of a more technical nature, it was an essential precondition for future cooperation. 2015 was the first time that Colombia successfully participated in the NATO-led Operation Ocean Shield to combat piracy in the Horn of Africa, where it demonstrated its high level of professionalism and the ability to militarily cooperate in accordance with NATO standards. In 2017, Colombia and NATO signed an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP), which was updated in 2019. The programme's priorities included: cyber

security, maritime security, the fight against terrorism, gender and security, demining, and strengthening the capacities and capabilities of the Colombian military. At a press conference with President Santos in Brussels in 2018, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also expressed the hope that the Colombian experience could contribute to the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan.³ In December 2021, the partners agreed to intensify their cooperation by signing an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP).

This is a model agreement, as it is the first of its kind that NATO has concluded with one of its partners. The ITPP set out several specific aims for the partnership: dialogue and consultation; counter-terrorism; disaster management; education and training in the security sector; strengthening integrity and transparency in the security and defence sector; capability development and interoperability of the armed forces; language skills in NATO languages for Colombian military personnel; security diplomacy; cyber security; and climate change and security.⁴ On paper, this is an ambitious agenda for further cooperation between Colombia and NATO.

Joint Interests and Goals of the Partnership

Colombia and NATO derive many joint benefits from the global partnership. For decades, Colombia had no option but to concentrate on its domestic conflict and the fight against guerrilla movements, drug cartels and other heavily armed organised criminal groups. Now, however, the partnership affords the opportunity to further professionalise its military and security apparatus and adapt it to international standards. Joint exercises and deployments with NATO forces as well as access to the wide range of services offered by NATO training centres will strengthen the Colombian military's expertise and improve its interoperability with international partners.

Thanks to its partnership with NATO, Colombia has already been able to report progress in the fight against chronic corruption in the defence

and security sector. NATO standards and control mechanisms have been introduced in the military to create transparency when awarding contracts and procuring materiel.

The joint training programmes on human rights and human security are also crucial for enhancing the professionalism and integrity of the Colombian armed forces, given that during the internal conflict, members of the military committed serious human rights violations by tolerating or even coordinating massacres of civilians by paramilitary groups and murdering civilians in order to pass them off as guerrillas killed in battle. These crimes are currently being investigated and dealt with by the transitional justice system agreed in the peace treaty with the FARC. The training courses with NATO help to ensure that respect for human rights and protection of the civilian population become embedded in the Colombian military's DNA and are guaranteed for the future.

Colombia is not a one-sided beneficiary of the partnership. It also provides skills to NATO.

Another factor that should not be overlooked are the programmes to promote bilingualism in English and Spanish for command personnel, which is a basic requirement for effective cooperation in international missions. As regards cyber security – a topic of increasing importance for security and defence policy in Colombia in light of the growing number of cyber-attacks – the country can benefit from working with NATO member states, as Colombia's experience and capacities in this area are still inadequately developed. Colombia also has a great deal of catching up to do when it comes to gender and security, especially the integration of women in leadership positions in the military and police. This is to be remedied through the introduction of NATO standards.

Both sides benefit from the partnership when it comes to the environment, climate change

and security. Colombia has defined these three issues as a key area for national security and launched the Artemisa military operation under President Iván Duque (2018 to 2022) to combat the illegal clearing of the rainforest and protect the extensive national parks. Twenty-three thousand soldiers and police officers were deployed to protect 200,000 hectares of forest. The results are mixed, but provide a vital information basis for future cooperation in the area of environment and security. Since taking office in August 2022, President Gustavo Petro has made the protection of the Amazon rainforest a core topic of his agenda, and he even proposed setting up an “Amazon NATO” at the Amazon Summit in Belém, Brazil, in August 2023. This is an agreement on military and judicial cooperation between the Amazonian states to take action against illegal deforestation.⁵

Colombia is not a one-sided beneficiary of the partnership. It also provides NATO with vital knowledge and skills that cannot simply be taken as a matter of course among member states. This includes decades-long experience in irregular or asymmetric warfare and the knowledge thus acquired, along with a high degree of professionalisation, especially among commandos and special forces.

The elimination of key leaders was vital for winning the fight against the FARC. Under President Duque, the strategy of identifying and eliminating targets of high operational value was also successfully continued in the fight against FARC dissidents and other illegal armed groups. The high quality of Colombia's special forces is also evident when compared to other countries in the region. Since 2006, Colombian special forces have won the American commando competition twelve times, making them the best on the continent.⁶ The capabilities of the Colombian special forces and their experience in the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime are of great interest to NATO member states in view of the asymmetric challenges described in the new Strategic Concept of 2022.⁷



Colombian experts have trained Ukrainian soldiers in detecting and defusing mines.

Colombia also has extensive experience in humanitarian and military mine clearance. In 2019, the Colombian training centre CIDES (Centro Internacional de Desminado) became the 33rd member of the NATO Partnership Training and Education Centres (PTEC) network and has since run several training courses for NATO personnel. Colombian experts have

also trained Ukrainian soldiers in detecting and defusing mines so as to support Ukraine's fight against the Russian invasion.

Apart from military conflicts, the Colombian armed forces have also gained valuable experience in the peace process with the FARC guerrillas and can contribute this to the NATO network. The military played a key role, both as an actor at the negotiating table and in the subsequent stages of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of the former FARC combatants.⁸ This expertise is of great interest to NATO partners with respect to other post-conflict scenarios and future stabilisation and peacekeeping missions.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (right) and then Colombian President Iván Duque after a meeting in Brussels, in 2018: Colombia and NATO both benefit in various ways from their cooperation. Photo: © Dursun Aydemir, AA, picture alliance.

Outlook for the Partnership after the Change of Government in 2022

August 2022 was the first time that a decidedly left-wing president had taken the helm of a traditionally conservative Colombia. President Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M-19 guerrillas demobilised in 1990, former mayor of the capital Bogotá and a long-time senator, had often levelled sharp criticism at previous

governments from the opposition bench for their rapprochement with NATO and close partnership with the US. He continued his anti-NATO and anti-US rhetoric even after taking office, utilising a classic narrative of the Latin American left: the imperialist North systematically oppresses and exploits the Global South in the colonial tradition. Since then, there has been a clear change of direction in Colombia's foreign policy, with the aim of strengthening



At ease with dictators: Colombia's current President Gustavo Petro (left) is seeking rapprochement with the left-wing autocratic Maduro regime in Venezuela after years of frosty relations. Although he shares the latter's anti-Western rhetoric, in practice Petro has not yet diminished cooperation with NATO. Photo: © Ariana Cubillos, AP, picture alliance.

cooperation with countries of the Global South. The Petro government does not shy away from contact with dictatorships or authoritarian regimes.

This is particularly evident in the resumption of diplomatic relations and cordial tone adopted with the Maduro regime in Venezuela. In contrast to his predecessor Duque, President Petro has yet to utter a single word of condemnation about the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, instead limiting himself to calling for peace on both sides. The same applies to the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 and the Israeli response. True to the spirit of his former guerrilla group M-19, which bombed the Israeli embassy in Bogotá in the 1980s, he has repeatedly legitimised the “Palestinian people’s struggle for liberation” and sees Israel in the role of aggressor.

Then President Duque voiced criticism of a deepening Russia-China cooperation, including their support for the repressive regime in Venezuela, to NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg during his visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels in February 2022, only a few days prior to the Russian attack on Ukraine,⁹ yet such a conversation would be unthinkable under the current presidency. In his much-noticed first speech as Colombian President to the UN General Assembly in September 2022, Petro said: “Why wage war when we need to save the human species? What use are NATO and empires when the end of intelligence is imminent?”¹⁰

However, political observers point out that the president’s harsh anti-imperialist rhetoric is more aimed at satisfying his own supporters, left-wing parties and political forces at home than any serious desire to end the partnership with NATO. It was quite the opposite: following his speech to the UN, President Petro met with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg in New York. The content of the meeting has not been disclosed. Some of Petro’s domestic supporters accuse the president of duplicity and incoherence and vehemently call for an end to the cooperation with NATO, whereas military circles

confirm that, in practical terms, the partnership is continuing to run smoothly.

For example, in May 2023, the 22nd annual meeting of the PTEC-NATO training centres was held in Bogotá. One of the outcomes of this was an agreement to support Ukraine with military training, particularly in the areas of defence against cyber-attacks, energy security and mine clearance. In September, a group of students from the Colombian War College paid a routine visit to NATO headquarters to discuss current security issues, the war in Ukraine, the role of NATO and the new Strategic Concept. In September, too, Colombian Defence Minister Iván Velásquez Gómez visited NATO in Brussels and exchanged views with NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană on the status and future of the agreed partnership programme.¹¹

The global partnership between Colombia and NATO is far from being a paper tiger.

To the displeasure of the president’s left-wing supporters in Colombia and to the surprise of many left-wing populist politicians in the region, the Petro government’s guidelines on security and defence policy contain a clear commitment to continuing the partnership and expanding relations with NATO. For example, the strategy adopted by the government is to advance the international security and defence sector agenda and strengthen cooperation with NATO within this framework, particularly in the areas of cyber security, climate change, human rights and the integrity of the military. The government also wants to continue enhancing the capabilities of its own military, drawing on NATO’s training and education programme and participating in joint exercises.¹² In this way, the incumbent Colombian president’s jarring, anti-imperialist rhetoric lies in stark contrast to the hitherto harmonious development of the partnership between Colombia and NATO and its own security policy agenda.



Political observers believe that President Petro faces a dilemma. On the one hand, as Colombia's first left-wing president, he has to fulfil the expectations of his voters and supporters. On the other hand, as a political realist, he is aware of just how important the global partnership with NATO is to Colombia. As the only NATO partner in Latin America, Colombia has a unique selling point that gives the president prestige, international standing and a voice in a major international forum.

In view of the still precarious security situation in the country – even after the peace treaty with the FARC – there are practical reasons, too, for advancing professionalisation of the country's military with the support of NATO partners. Decoupling from NATO's information, research and training networks and giving up privileged access to materiel procurement would weaken the performance of the Colombian armed forces over the medium term and instantly trigger sharp criticism of the president in the security and defence sector. Against this backdrop, the Petro government can be expected to continue walking a tightrope between rhetoric and practical implementation.

Conclusion

The global partnership between Colombia and NATO is far from being a paper tiger. On the contrary, the security cooperation is both substantial and concrete. Since 2013, the relationship has been steadily developing and deepening. Due to its long-standing domestic conflict, the subsequent peace process with the FARC and numerous successful participations in UN peacekeeping missions¹³, Colombia's valuable experience and expertise is beneficial to the NATO network. With the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) that was signed in 2021, Colombia can even be seen as a pioneer and role model among the 40 or so different NATO partnerships.

The change of government in Colombia in August 2022 and President Petro's anti-NATO rhetoric have not yet posed an obstacle to practical cooperation. Colombia's withdrawal from

NATO networks is considered highly unlikely over the short-to-medium term. Even though, for ideological reasons, the current Colombian government strives for a more neutral position and equidistance between the major powers, especially the US and China, in lieu of its traditionally close partnership with the US, and seems to attach less importance to the domestic political conditions of international partners, Colombia remains structurally an important value partner that is indispensable in the fight for democracy and a rules-based world order.

In addition to deterrence, defence and crisis prevention, NATO's current Strategic Concept defines cooperative security as a key task of the Alliance. The corresponding section under point 42 states: "Political dialogue and practical cooperation with partners, based on mutual respect and benefit, contribute to stability beyond our borders, enhance our security at home and support NATO's core tasks. Partnerships are crucial to protect the global commons, enhance our resilience and uphold the rules-based international order."¹⁴

With this in mind, political decision-makers in Colombia and NATO should endeavour to further expand and deepen the global partnership in their mutual interest in order to leverage untapped potential. Political and military actors in Germany should also make greater use of the framework of NATO's global partnership with Colombia so as to promote security policy cooperation. The German and Colombian navies have traditionally had a close relationship and worked together for decades in terms of training, personnel exchange and armaments projects. Germany could play a key role in expanding the partnership in light of this.

- translated from German -

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- 13 Colombia has participated in nine UN peacekeeping missions to date. See Cabrera Ortiz / Alarcon Moreno 2021, n.8, p.320.
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