



## Introduction

We are facing the final months of Gustavo Petro's presidency, and various acts of violence have occurred in the country in a notable manner. First, the attack on June 7, 2025, against presidential candidate Miguel Uribe, who died two months later. Later, the terrorist attack in Cali on August 21, attributed to dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), which left seven dead and 80 wounded. Both events evoke an image of weakness that, in a way, connects with the memory of some of the most violent episodes of a not-so-distant past.

As the government of the National Historic Pact enters the final year of its presidential term, and as the first progressive administration in Colombia's democratic history, it is time to take stock and consider what elements, progress, or setbacks Gustavo Petro's mandate leaves behind in relation to the management of security and the transformation of violence. While it's true that his arrival at the Casa de Nariño initially offered reasonable optimism regarding his aspiration to deactivate and demobilize certain armed actors in the conflict, the data and figures do not convey the same sentiment.

In other words, even though peace has occupied a prominent role in public debate and government initiatives since the beginning of his presidency, the various efforts toward what is known as "total peace" are far from having prospered. This pessimism could be reflected in the difficulties in negotiating any minimal progress in deactivating violence with the National Liberation Army (ELN) or with dissidents of the FARC-EP<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the initial eagerness to regain commitment to the Peace Agreement signed in November 2016 does not offer a better scenario, and which, due to government resistance during Iván Duque's presidency, experienced its lowest point between 2018 and 2022. So much so that, according to the monitoring reports periodically produced by the Kroc Institute at the University of Notre Dame, progress in implementation under the current administration has been even less than under its predecessor<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, with the aim of analysing and taking stock of the more than three years that Petro's government has been in power in relation to the armed conflict, the following work is

---

<sup>1</sup> More than 90% of the over 13,000 signatories to the Peace Agreement in November 2016 never returned to violence, so the bulk of the dissidents are new recruits.

<sup>2</sup> INSTITUTO KROC, *Navegando las aguas de la paz: avances, retos y oportunidades en el octavo año de implementación diciembre 2023 a noviembre 2024*, Bogotá, 2025.

structured in four clearly differentiated parts. First, the main objectives of the Executive in terms of peacebuilding and the transformation of violence are presented. Next, this is related to the situation of multiple negotiations that were proposed with the different armed groups involved, from the ELN and the dissidents of the FARC-EP to groups that are the heirs of paramilitarism. Thirdly, it addresses some issues that, in relation to the above, have contributed to the deterioration of security conditions in the country. The text concludes with some conclusions which, beyond highlighting some of the arguments put forward, anticipate other issues that may arise in the coming months, with a view to the new elections to be held in the spring of 2026.

### **A peace policy that was destined to be a turning point**

The new executive began its term with broad support in the legislature, as several liberal and even conservative figures stood out among the main ministers, such as Alejandro Gaviria (Education), José Antonio Ocampo (Finance) and Álvaro Leyva (Foreign Affairs). In less than a year, as a result of internal tensions, personal disputes, especially with figures close to the president, such as Armando Benedetti and Laura Sarabia, as well as a lack of agreement on the development of ambitious social legislation, the coalition broke down and the ministerial crisis ended with the removal of almost all those who were not Gustavo Petro's personal choices.

Regarding peace policy, and despite these governmental difficulties, the government always sought to show that it was a priority. In fact, one of the first laws promoted by the new government was the Public Order Law (Law 2272 of 2022). Peace was also reflected in the National Development Plan, which sets out the roadmap for the next four years of the mandate and was included in Law 2294 of 2023.

To this end, the national peace policy, popularised under the label ‘total peace’, demanded its centrality as an urgent and cross-cutting element of the rest of the government's agenda. This included not only the priority implementation of the agreement signed with the FARC-EP, but also the provision of other elements with which to aspire to achieve stable, lasting peace with full guarantees for the country<sup>3</sup>. This aspect, included

---

<sup>3</sup> CAIRO, Heriberto *et al.* *De la paz territorial a la paz total en Colombia: una aproximación socio-espacial.* Madrid, Trama, 2024.

in the second article of the aforementioned Law 2272, already warned of the possibility of advancing dialogue processes with different violent groups of very different natures, from the ELN to the Clan del Golfo, Los Pachenca, Los Pachully or La Oficina - all of them heirs to paramilitarism - and including different armed organisations that are themselves recognised as continuations of the FARC-EP<sup>4</sup>.

The National Development Plan included three specific chapters on the commitment to peace in Colombia. First, one specifically related to the agreement signed with the FARC-EP, whose main priorities were the transformation of areas with the highest density of coca crops, investment in the municipalities most affected by violence and drugs, and progress in building a solid jurisdictional and transitional architecture with full guarantees. Secondly, the government's commitment to increase the budget for victims of violence by 16% stands out, which meant having more than 50 billion pesos available for these four years (equivalent to eleven million euros). Finally, the government assumed peace as a participatory, broad, inclusive and comprehensive commitment to achieving stable and lasting peace, with guarantees of non-repetition of violence and security for all Colombians.

Once again, it was urged to conceive of the need for partial agreements with the largest possible conglomerate of armed actors active in the Colombian violence. Additionally, and in the face of a reality of untamed and virtually unchanging violence over the last few decades, the bulk of policies for deactivating violence ended up prioritising up to 344 municipalities over which to have a greater number of investments, capacities and opportunities -including the strengthening of spaces for dialogue with armed actors present there-.

### **An impracticable framework for negotiations**

The goal of "total peace" aspired to the development of different spaces for dialogue, as anticipated, with very different armed groups. The priority was always the ELN, and for this reason, the dialogue agenda, abandoned by both sides in early 2018 following the

---

<sup>4</sup> BADILLO, Reynell y TREJOS, Luis. "Las Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia como grupo armado politizado: Un nuevo paradigma del crimen organizado". *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, 21(42), 2023, 327–351.

guerrilla's failed dialogue process with the government of Juan Manuel Santos, was resumed<sup>5</sup>. Despite several rounds of negotiations held outside the country between 2022 and 2023, with the support of countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, and Brazil, the process never made progress. The lack of concrete resolution on complex issues, such as victims, drug trafficking, and arms deliveries, compounded the difficulties in advancing the bilateral cessation of hostilities, which was in effect for 180 days on two occasions. If anything became evident during this time, it was the ELN's lack of internal cohesion, especially due to the fracture between an old political leadership, distant from the war fronts, and a renewed, highly belligerent leadership, active in the areas with the deepest roots of the illicit economies that fuel the guerrilla's finances<sup>6</sup>. Since March 2023, internal ELN criticisms of the peace policy have been leaked from the Eastern, Northeastern, and Western War Fronts, active in Arauca, Norte de Santander, and Chocó, respectively. These three groups, as a separate issue, have carried out kidnappings, armed operations, and mass displacements during this time, even under a ceasefire.

Regarding the FARC-EP dissidents, a definitive legal framework has never been established, so this, combined with the lack of will to undertake an effective demobilization process, has always made it impossible for timid gestures and intentions to emerge. The group formerly known as the Central General Staff (EMC), now led by "Iván Mordisco," was reluctant to join the Peace Agreement from the moment it was discussed and signed in 2016, managing to transition from a fractious and residual group to the most important successor group of the FARC-EP—although it remains internally challenged by a second structure led by "Calarcá." They are present not only in eastern Colombia but also in the south and southwest of the country. They involve more than 3,000 troops<sup>7</sup> and, like the rest of the country's illegal armed groups, are clearly involved in the coca growing business and illicit economies.

In fact, they have been the greatest opponent of the ELN's predominant position in eastern Colombia, especially in the departments of Arauca and Norte de Santander,

---

<sup>5</sup> RÍOS, Jerónimo. "El Ejército de Liberación Nacional, el gobierno de Iván Duque y la encrucijada de la paz en Colombia". *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 46(2), 2021, 222–239.

<sup>6</sup> RÍOS, Jerónimo. "ELN y la paz total en Colombia: las dificultades de un proceso de negociación que nunca acaba". *Revista de Pensamiento Estratégico y Seguridad CISDE*, 9(1), 2024, 91-105.

<sup>7</sup> FUNDACIÓN IDEAS PARA LA PAZ. *El proyecto Estado Mayor Central*. Bogotá, 2023.

although they also exert their influence in other border locations with Venezuela. In other words, while the "total peace" achieved territorial ceasefires in 2023, for example, in Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta, and Putumayo, these situations were instrumentalized in favor of the armed organization to accumulate capabilities and optimize its presence in the territory. A reality that, starting in early 2024, would precipitate a return to open confrontation with the State and, likewise, intensify throughout 2025, between "Mordisco" and "Calarcá".

A similar fate befell the government's negotiating bid with the country's other major dissident group: Segunda Marquetalia<sup>8</sup>. This group emerged in late August 2019, led by those who had spearheaded the dialogue process with the Colombian government in Cuba: "Iván Márquez" and "Jesús Santrich." Despite collaboration with the ELN and unsuccessful attempts at reaching an agreement with the EMC, its clashes with the latter organization occurred specifically along a large part of the border corridor with Venezuela, where several of the most prominent members of Segunda Marquetalia were killed. Progress was similarly limited, given that, in parallel with apparent efforts at dialogue, between 2022 and 2024 the group doubled its operations across much of the Colombian Amazon, but also in other southern departments, such as Nariño and Cauca. In any case, its armed and territorial capabilities are much smaller than those of the EMC, with an estimated armed force of around 1,500 troops. As if that weren't enough, the definitive breakdown in dialogue channels in July 2024 has been compounded by various fragmentations that have ultimately made the Colombian state's military response even more difficult.

Regarding the various criminal expressions associated with post-paramilitarism, it should be noted that any progress in dialogue or a cessation of hostilities with these types of structures has been impractical. This is again due to the reluctance of groups of this nature, and especially the Clan del Golfo, to accept submission to justice without any political negotiation. The Clan del Golfo is the largest criminal organization in Colombia, with some recent estimates<sup>9</sup> putting its membership at nearly 10,000. It often operates through the outsourcing and franchising of its criminal activities, with more than 3,000

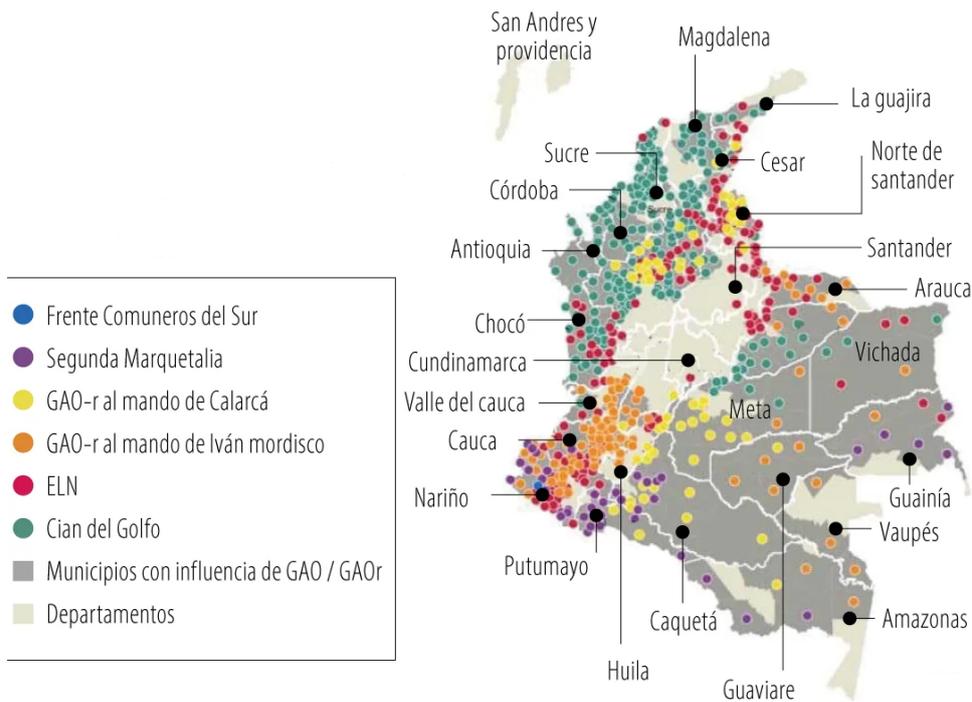
---

<sup>8</sup> Operation Marquetalia, on 27 May 1964, served as the founding myth of the FARC-EP.

<sup>9</sup> FUNDACIÓN IDEAS PARA LA PAZ. "Así llega el Clan del Golfo a un nuevo intento de diálogos de paz". Bogotá, 2025. <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/noticias/2025-08/asi-llega-el-clan-del-golfo-a-un-nuevo-intento-de-dialogos-de-paz-ahora-en-catar>

men in its armed structure. It has a presence in every department of the Caribbean region and conflicts with almost all the groups, in regions as diverse as Antioquia, Chocó, Catatumbo, and parts of the Eastern Plains.

**Map 1. Influence of armed groups in Colombia, 2024**



**Source: National Police/ LR-ER**

The impossibility of negotiation has finally extended to other groups that have also been left out of the "total peace" and are associated with drug trafficking and organized crime. For example, in June 2023, up to 17 operational structures within the Medellín Criminal Gangs made a show of assuming a possible framework for dialogue with the government. It was a process that began in the Itagüí prison but was distorted by the lack of real commitment and the absence of a regulatory framework that would establish the stages and commitments that would lead to their surrender and disarmament.

Similarly, the Shottas and the Espartanos, active in Buenaventura and comprising a total of 1,700 individuals, began a joint process on July 18, 2023, when spokespersons for both groups participated from the Diocese of Buenaventura to activate a process like the one taking place in Medellín. However, after more setbacks than progress, without their own regulatory framework, and with little conviction to advance their deconstructing, their return to violent activity began in early 2025, worsening the public order situation in the

city of Buenaventura, the second largest in the department of Valle del Cauca.

### **Erosion of security and weakening of the state response**

Based on the circumstances described above, it is reasonable to conclude that the objectives set by the 'total peace' policy have become blurred and unfeasible. Neither the fact that this was the first progressive government in decades, nor the apparent willingness to move forward in transforming violence, nor Gustavo Petro's past militancy in the M-19 guerrilla group, were sufficient conditions to overcome unbridled violence. On the contrary, the policy of negotiating with different armed groups has been characterised by its disregard for the extensive literature on conflict resolution and peace research. In other words, opening different processes at the same time, with structures of disparate nature, scope and meaning, without prior legal frameworks and under different coordinates, requirements and negotiating teams, accumulates all the possible options for its impracticability, according to what has been proposed, among others, by Balian and Bearman<sup>10</sup>.

On the other hand, there would be a complete absence of that ripe moment that William Zartman<sup>11</sup> identifies as necessary to understand that the parties in dispute are in a mutually hating stalemate in which proposing a negotiation, in rational terms, is more desirable than maintaining a context of armed confrontation. Thus, in line with the economic, territorial and armed factors associated with the main violent actors in Colombia – the ELN, EMC, Segunda Marquetalia and Clan del Golfo – and given that all indicators show an upward trend in their expressions of violence and capacity, it is difficult to understand how this condition could arise.

In fact, although the fact that there are more than 30,000 people directly associated with violence in Colombia does not translate into a decline in national homicide rates (around 25 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants), it does correspond to an erosion of security and violence in a unique geographical area, which has hardly changed in recent years<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> BALIAN, Hrag y BEARMAN, Peter. "Pathways to violence: dynamics for the continuation of large-scale conflict". *Sociological Theory*, 36(2), 2018, 210-220.

<sup>11</sup> ZARTMAN, William. "The timing of peace initiatives: Hurting stalemates and ripe moments". *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 1(1), 2001, 8-18.

<sup>12</sup> RÍOS, Jerónimo. "Where is Territorial Peace? Violence, Drug Trafficking and Territory: The Killings of Former Guerrilla Combatants and Social Leaders in Colombia (2016-2021)". *Partecipazione e conflitto*,

It suffices to recall that Norte de Santander (northeastern Colombia) and southern Meta, together with Caquetá, Putumayo, Nariño, and Cauca (in the south and southwestern part of the country), added to Antioquia, account for more than 80% of the country's coca cultivation and clandestine laboratories. Likewise, it is in these same enclaves where the bulk of the murders of former FARC-EP combatants who signed the Peace Agreement and social leaders and activists have been concentrated, numbering almost 500 and more than 2,000, respectively, since November 2016<sup>13</sup>.

In addition to the above, the Government seems to have almost always yielded to the demands, exceptions and prerogatives of armed groups, especially the ELN, while its most notable military responses only appeared when the multiple dialogue processes were distorted by discredit, mistrust and territorial outbreaks of violence. Perhaps all of this has contributed to the image of weakness, improvisation and relative neglect conveyed by the executive branch, which has been exploited to their advantage by most of the country's violent organisations.

It should be remembered that between 2002 and 2010, Colombia became considerably more militarised, establishing itself as one of the main armed forces on the continent. With an average expenditure of almost 4% of GDP, the country increased its capabilities, raising its troop numbers by almost 40%, from 313,000 police and military personnel to more than 440,000. Intelligence, air resources and capabilities, and night combat were some of the priorities of this transformation, in addition to the multiplication of structures in much of Colombia's hostile and peripheral geography<sup>14</sup>. Since then, the parity between the number of military forces and their effective power has been considerably reduced, so that while in numerical terms Colombia remains the third largest force in Latin America, with 181,000 active military personnel, in the annual report published each year by the Military Strength Ranking, the country ranks 46th.

This position of weakness can be understood, in line with Pizarro's argument, for several reasons<sup>15</sup>. Firstly, a couple of decades ago, within the framework of military cooperation

---

15(1), 2022, 290-314.

<sup>13</sup> INDEPAZ. Viewer of murders of signatories to the Peace Agreement in Colombia. Bogota, 2025. <https://indepaz.org.co/visor-de-asesinato-a-firmantes-del-acuerdo-de-paz-en-colombia/>

<sup>14</sup> PIZARRO, Eduardo. "Verdadero o falso: ¿se han debilitado las Fuerzas Militares en Colombia?" *Contexto*, 2025. <https://contextomedia.com/verdadero-o-falso-se-han-debilitado-las-fuerzas-militares-en-colombia/>

<sup>15</sup> RÍOS, Jerónimo. *Historia de la violencia en Colombia, 1946-2020. Una mirada territorial*. Madrid, Sílex

with the United States and in compliance with the well-known Plan Colombia, the country received more than 10 billion dollars, which enabled it to expand its air fleet with Black Hawks, Tucanos, Super Tucanos and MI-17s. Today, most of the helicopter fleet is inoperative due to a lack of materials and spare parts, so that, as the Ministry of Defence itself acknowledges, four out of ten aircraft are immobilised, with more than 100 helicopters out of service. On the other hand, intelligence and communication capabilities have also been weakened, so that, for example, the use of unofficial communication channels, such as WhatsApp, has become normalised in many cases. Similarly, the number of troops has been reduced by 27% over the last decade, which has had an impact on the state's presence in certain areas affected by violence.

In addition to the above, and even though the defence budget has increased in recent years, 79% of it is absorbed by personnel costs, because of the recent increase in subsidies for military personnel in training, from 30% to 70% of the minimum wage, as well as growing pension costs. This is a worrying development that calls for a rethink and optimisation of investment, with a more rational approach that prioritises investment in armaments, technology and capabilities<sup>16</sup>. Once again, this is related to the precariousness with which the State responds to threats associated with the armed conflict, especially in the peripheral regions of the border corridor with Venezuela, in eastern and north-eastern Colombia, or in the south and south-west of the country, where criminal governance has taken root with little pressure or opposition from the State<sup>17</sup>. A state that, almost chronically, continues to suffer from having more territory than institutional capacity, and that, even when the FARC-EP demobilised, was never able to co-opt and occupy these areas of violence. These are locations where new structures and disputes over control of illicit resources and territory quickly proliferated, leaving the state in a marginal position.

## Conclusions

According to what has been discussed in these pages, the situation of increasing erosion of security and the chronic nature of violence associated with armed conflict and illicit

---

Ediciones, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> PIZARRO, ¿Verdadero o falso...*op.cit.*, s.p.

<sup>17</sup> AZNAR, Federico. "Colombia, ¿hacia la paz total?". *Documento de Investigación IEEEE*, 1, 2023, 1-77.

economies intertwines structural elements and problems with other aspects more directly associated with the years of Gustavo Petro's government. In other words, the problem of the lack of state presence in much of the territory, coupled with the irreducible volume of illicit economies—strongly associated with drug trafficking, illegal mining, and smuggling—is compounded by a deeply voluntaristic government policy that has, however, committed two major errors. On the one hand, promoting a space for multiple dialogue, with different agendas, channels, interlocutors, demands and commitments, which has been heavily contaminated by the very occurrence of confrontations, outside the state, between these same armed groups. Likewise, neglecting security policy, effective control of the territory and pressure against violent organisations in a much more direct way. In this regard, for example, it should be remembered how, in order to strengthen its position at the negotiating table with the FARC-EP, while this was being designed and promoted informally since the end of 2010, the government of Juan Manuel Santos killed the two highest military and political leaders of the guerrilla group, ‘Mono Jojoy’ and ‘Alfonso Cano’.

In March and May, Colombia will hold legislative and presidential elections, and the issue of peace, but above all security, will undoubtedly be central elements of the campaign. In fact, in recent months, the ELN and the Clan del Golfo have urged a return to dialogue, although there is not enough time to implement everything that a dialogue process entails and involves. It is to be hoped that, if there is any hasty progress, it will not compromise the new executive, unless it is progressive, which is highly unlikely. For the moment, in almost all the polls – even though everything remains to be decided – the controversial figure of Abelardo de la Espriella stands out. He is an ultra-conservative candidate who, in terms of the security agenda, is very similar to the Salvadoran president, Nayib Bukele. Only candidates on the left or centre-left, from Iván Cepeda to Claudia López, could give some semblance of continuity to the efforts, with more shadows than lights, developed in recent years, and which, in any case, would require necessary readjustments and changes in national policy. Likewise, apart from the partisan use that electoral contenders make of security policy, it remains to be seen what the different armed groups will do, which, as in the past, may establish their position of power by escalating and making their operational capabilities more visible. If this were to happen, violence would be given an even more prominent role, which could shape the course and ideological colour of the

next Colombian presidency for the period 2026-2030.

*Jerónimo Ríos Sierra\**  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
[@Jeronimo\\_Rios\\_](#)