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We invite you to submit original contributions on issues requiring particular attention in areas related to defense and security at the national, regional, and global levels.

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HIGHLIGHTS

SUBREGIONAL COORDINATION
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

By Dolores Bermeo-Lara

COMMENTARY

ECUADOR FACES
TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED
CRIME

By Gen. (SP) Paco Moncayo

ANALYSIS

COLOMBIA: HUMAN SECURITY
AND PUBLIC SECURITY
PERFORMANCE (2022–2026)

By Carlos Medina Gallego



Image Source: *The White House*, available at:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/gallery/president-donald-j-trump-delivers-remarks-during-the-shield-of-the-americas-summit/>

OBSERVER

THE GREAT CHALLENGE OF GUARANTEEING
HEMISPHERIC SECURITY WITHOUT REPEATING
THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST

By Bernardo Gortaire-Morejón

KEY DATES

June 22–24: 50th Session of the OAS General Assembly. Panama City, Panama

July 7–10: 17th Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CMDA). Cusco, Peru.

July 7–10: AI for Good, Global Summit. Geneva, Switzerland.

September 14 – 18: 70th General Conference IAEA. Vienna, Austria.

September 22 – 26, 28: UNGA High-Level General Debate. UNHQ New York, The United States.



Image Source: Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas
<https://www.cmda-info.net/>

Welcome to the fourth edition of RESDAL's *Security and Defense Monitor*.

During the first half of the year, we have closely observed how the international security landscape continues to evolve, significantly impacting power dynamics and avenues for cooperation at the global, regional, and bilateral levels.

In the case of Latin America, it is particularly important to analyze how the region fits into an international landscape marked by growing tensions. While this context may exacerbate challenges and create divisions, it also opens up opportunities to promote and strengthen cooperation mechanisms in the face of common transnational threats.

With the aim of contributing to the analysis and understanding of these processes, this issue brings together a series of reflections on various phenomena, challenges, and issues affecting security and defense at the national and regional levels, as well as policy initiatives aimed at coordinating joint actions in this regard.

We thank the authors of this issue for their valuable contribution to the debate, to knowledge, and to the development of proposals aimed at addressing current challenges with a view to the future, as well as at strengthening institutional and operational capabilities.

We invite all those interested in sharing their reflections and expertise to join us in future editions.



DOCUMENTS OF INTEREST

- ❖ **Global Peace Index 2026**
The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP)
Published in June 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **National Drug Control Strategy 2026**
The Office of National Drug Control Policy.
Published on May 4, 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **Programming for Climate, Peace, and Security**
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Published in May 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **The State of Human Rights in the World**
Amnesty International.
Published in April 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **Economic Outlook for Latin America and the Caribbean**
World Bank
Published in April 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **Democracy Report 2026. "Unraveling the Democratic Era?"**
V-DEM Institute
Published in March 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **The Global Terrorism Index 2026**
Institute for Economics & Peace
Published in March 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **2026 Annual Threat Assessment**
The U.S. Intelligence Community
Published in March 2026. [Here](#)
- ❖ **World Inequality Report 2026**
World Inequality Lab. [Here](#)

SUBREGIONAL COORDINATION AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Dolores Bermeo-Lara

Last May, the ministers of foreign affairs and security from five of the twelve South American countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru—met in Santiago, Chile, where they signed the *Santiago Regional Commitment against Transnational Organized Crime* (Compromiso Regional de Santiago contra la Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional).¹

To provide an overview of the scope, actions, and projections covered by this commitment, this article will outline some of the main elements of the political declaration.

SCOPE OF THE SANTIAGO REGIONAL COMMITMENT

The Commitment begins by referencing the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* —Palermo Convention— and its Protocols, thereby demonstrating the commitment to frame the joint actions undertaken by the countries within the legal and institutional framework provided by the Palermo Convention and its Protocols, which have been in force since 2003.²

Likewise, the representatives of the signatory states recognize the transnational nature of organized crime, considered “one of the main threats to governance, well-being, and stability (...) of societies,” which makes a coordinated regional response imperative. Hence, they leave open the possibility for other states to join in order to strengthen the mechanisms established under this initiative.

One point worth noting is the Commitment’s emphasis on the importance of promoting the ratification of the Founding Treaty of the American Police Community (AMERIPOL), which is regarded as

a “regional platform for the exchange of information and the coordination of simultaneous operational actions.”

The Community of Police Forces of the Americas (AMERIPOL) was created in 2007 as a mechanism for police cooperation in the hemisphere; its mission is to “promote joint actions against transnational organized crime, foster judicial assistance, and consolidate a hemispheric police doctrine based on trust and cooperation.”³ According to its official website, AMERIPOL comprises 38 police forces from 30 countries, 40 observer organizations and strategic partners from 17 countries, and 11 multilateral organizations, including the OAS, INTERPOL, EUROPOL, the United Nations, and the European Union.

Thirteen AMERIPOL member countries signed the Constitutive Treaty in Brasília on November 9, 2023.⁴ The Treaty has not yet entered into force, since, as stated in Article 23, it will enter into force on the date the fifth instrument of ratification is deposited. One of the benefits of AMERIPOL having the Treaty is that it would grant the organization international legal personality, meaning that decisions adopted under its framework would be binding on the States Parties.

According to the Treaty, AMERIPOL’s mission is “to highlight and strengthen the coordinated and reciprocal actions of the police and public security forces (CPySP) of the member states and their mutual cooperation in preventing, investigating, and combating transnational criminal phenomena, in accordance with their respective national laws” (Art. 3). Furthermore, with regard to AMERIPOL’s functions as set forth in the Treaty, these are aimed at:

- a. Collecting, storing, processing, analyzing, and exchanging information.

¹Compromiso Regional de Santiago contra la Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional signed on May 28, 2026. Available at: <https://www.minrel.gob.cl/sala-de-prensa/compromiso-regional-de-santiago-contra-la-delincuencia-organizada>

² The following Protocols supplement the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air; Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components, and Ammunition. See United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime

.Available at:

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>

³ AMERIPOL’s official website. See <https://www.ameripol.org/noticias/>

⁴ The signatory countries to the AMERIPOL Founding Treaty are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Suriname, and Uruguay. See <https://aplicacao.itamaraty.gov.br/ApiConcordia/Documento/download/32559>

- b. Coordinating and organizing international police cooperation activities carried out by the CPySPs of the Member States.
- c. Generating crime statistics to assess threats, prepare strategic and operational analyses, and produce general situation reports.
- d. Developing, sharing, and promoting specialized knowledge on crime prevention methods, investigative procedures, and technical and forensic methods specific to the region.
- e. Providing technical advice to the States Parties and their respective institutions, upon request.
- f. Plan, conduct, coordinate, promote, and disseminate training activities, as determined by the regulations to be issued for that purpose.
- g. Establish cooperation agreements with actors in the international community who can contribute to AMERIPOL's mission.
- h. To facilitate coordinated police investigations in matters covered by this Treaty through Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), in accordance with the internal regulations of the States Parties. (AMERIPOL Treaty, Art. 3.2).

Among the immediate actions promoted by the *Santiago Regional Commitment* is the establishment of a Working Group composed of national agencies, which shall develop a Joint Action Plan promoting “concrete actions with measurable and verifiable results.” The document states that the Working Group's first meeting must be held within 90 days of May 28, 2026—the date of the Commitment's adoption. It also stipulates that, within 180 days, representatives of ministries and government agencies will meet to review the progress of the Commitment.

Specifically, the Working Group was recommended to develop proposals regarding security in the following areas:

- ❖ Financial and tax intelligence
- ❖ Traceability, immigration control, and border control
- ❖ Other matters of common interest

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The initiative and political will to promote coordination and cooperation in the area of security to address the threats and challenges posed by transnational organized crime undoubtedly represent progress in terms of joint action and the measures that can be adopted to tackle the criminal phenomenon plaguing Latin American states.

However, the absence of some countries in the region—particularly those affected by the presence of organized crime actors—weakens the capacity to jointly address the criminal phenomenon, as well as the measures undertaken by the Working Group and the ministries involved. An analysis of the regional political context suggests that one of the causes of this absence is divergent political positions, which prevent the absent states from recognizing that organized crime is a transnational threat and, therefore, must be addressed through regional cooperation and collaboration, particularly among border states.

Furthermore, although the Commitment highlights the importance of promoting the ratification of the AMERIPOL Constitutive Treaty—which would enable the police and public security forces of the member states to carry out the functions provided for in the treaty—the text lacks any specific mention of promoting policies aimed at the institutional strengthening and reform required by the region's police forces, as well as including among the issues to be addressed by the Working Group the operational and regulatory challenges and dilemmas surrounding the legitimate use of force to confront organized crime groups. This issue cuts across military operations aimed at containing and responding to organized crime actors.

Overall, despite the shortcomings identified, the *Santiago Regional Commitment against Transnational Organized Crime*, marks a significant step toward the consolidation of a regional political, legal, and operational framework. While challenges to its effective implementation persist, the Commitment provides a solid foundation for enhancing interstate cooperation in addressing transnational organized crime and its diverse manifestations, which continue to erode State security and directly impact the safety and well-being of their populations.

ECUADOR'S RESPONSE TO TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Gen. (SP) Paco Moncayo

INTRODUCTION

The situation of extreme insecurity facing Ecuador has drawn the attention of the international community. The question often asked is: How and why did a country that was once considered an “island of peace”—amid the conflict-ridden Latin American landscape—become one of the most violent in the world? This paper attempts to provide an answer to this crucial question.

In order to provide the broadest—yet concise—overview of such a complex problem, the paper begins with a brief description of the escalation of violence, starting in the final decades of the previous century. Next, the nature of the threats is analyzed, classifying them by origin: from global to regional to neighborhood-level threats, with an emphasis on those originating in Colombia, as they have the greatest impact on the situation.

Given that, to varying degrees, all the countries in the region have been exposed to the same threats—particularly Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru, as the main producers of illicit drugs and hubs from which criminal groups operate—and that these countries do not exhibit such extreme indicators of rising violence as is the case in Ecuador, the analysis begins by considering their level of vulnerability in the political, socioeconomic, and security spheres as a distinguishing factor. Finally, some conclusions are presented.

The methodology employed takes a qualitative approach and follows a descriptive-analytical process with a diachronic perspective, which seeks to provide an objective explanation of the problem in order to offer useful guidance for the search for solutions.

1. THE ROAD TO CRISIS

Ecuador had not been considered a violent country, especially compared to other Latin American nations. This reality led to the creation of the “Island of Peace” metaphor. However, the presence of criminal organizations linked to the illicit drug trade within its

borders—and the resulting violence—had already begun by the end of the previous century. In those years, the violence was political and stemmed from subversive groups of various ideological stripes linked to Marxism. In the 1980s, the Colombian group M-19 operated in the country alongside the Alfaro Vive Carajo (AVC) movement. Criminal violence, on the other hand, was perpetrated by gangs with no significant ties to transnational organized crime.

In that context, the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants rose from 6.3 in 1980 to 10.3 in 1987 and to 16.6 by the end of the century. From then on, except in 2003, when it dropped to 13.5, it remained around 17.0. (INEC data). During those years, the country experienced a period of great political instability. The following leaders held office: Abdalá Bucaram, Fabián Alarcón, Jamil Mahuad, Lucio Gutiérrez, and Alfredo Palacios. Amid a severe economic crisis in 2000, President Mahuad imposed the U.S. dollar as legal tender. This decision, positive in many respects, would have disastrous repercussions on the growth of criminal activities.

In 2007, economist Rafael Correa became president; he convened a Constituent Assembly, and the following year, a Constitution aligned with the political platform of so-called “*Socialismo del Siglo XXI*” (21st-Century Socialism) was approved by popular referendum. The homicide rate remained stable at around 17.6 until 2010 but began to drop sharply, falling to 7.99 by 2016. Various explanations have been put forward for this phenomenon. The positive ones are attributed to successful public safety policies. One of the leading experts on these issues, Fernando Carrión, argued that: “an institutional framework was established with the creation of the Ministries of Justice (prisons), the Interior (public safety), and Security Coordination, as well as a Multi-institutional Anti-Drug Committee” (Carrión, 2022, pp. 15–40). From another perspective, there have been allegations of a mafia-style pact between the government and criminal groups, as well as the manipulation of statistics.

In 2016, his ideological ally Lenín Moreno took office as president. Two catastrophic events for security then occurred: the failure of the peace agreement signed by the Colombian government with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the homicide rate jumped sharply to 20.8 in 2021, when Guillermo Lasso took office, and the following year, to

26.8—with Guayaquil ranking as one of the most violent cities in the world, with 1,537 homicides, surpassed only by the city of Esmeraldas, near the Colombian border.

The pernicious trend continued, and by 2023 the rate had reached 47.0. Facing impeachment proceedings, on May 17, 2023, the president invoked the constitutional provision of “mutual dissolution,” dissolved the National Assembly, and called for new elections. During the electoral process, candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated on August 9, 2023. The perpetrators were members of the drug-trafficking gang “Los Lobos”; the masterminds behind the crime have not yet been identified.

On November 23 of that year, businessman Daniel Noboa Azín won the election to complete the term originally assigned to President Guillermo Lasso. In the subsequent elections, he was reelected for the 2025–2029 term. The figures declined somewhat during 2024, with the rate reaching 39.0; however, the tragic pace of violence accelerated again in 2025, rising to 50.9 and reaching the shocking average of 25 murders per day (OECD, 2024).

Currently, illicit drug trafficking is the main driver of crime in Ecuador. Next in order are: illegal mining; public and private corruption; extortion, a form of “criminal rent” managed by criminal organizations that operate as a parallel state; money laundering, facilitated by the dollarized economy, with new methods including cryptocurrencies, sports betting, and online gambling; and finally, the last few spots are occupied by trafficking in arms, explosives, people, and fuel (OECD, 2026).

In its 2023 Report, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) cited Ecuador as an example of collaboration between local criminal groups and foreign traffickers from Colombia, Mexico, Italy, and the Balkans who arrive in the country to direct the supply of cocaine to European markets. Domestic groups collect the cocaine, transport it, protect the shipments, and receive their payment, either in cash or in kind. As the UNODC states, “traffickers from the Balkans and members of Italian criminal groups have settled in Ecuador to establish supply lines to European markets” (UNODC 2023, p. 26).

According to the UNODC, the reasons for the dramatic increase in violence are: 1) the struggle for

control of the supply chain among criminal groups; 2) territorial disputes among organizations that sell drugs at the retail level; 3) extortion of merchants, transporters, farmers, fishermen, and other businesspeople; 4) rivalries within the same criminal group and targeted killings of rivals; and 5) intimidation of public officials, especially judicial officials. Violence typically serves an instrumental purpose (as a tool), an expressive purpose (as a form of communication), or both (UNODC 2023, p. 88).

2. THREATS BY SOURCE

2.1 From the Global Level

The violence facing Ecuador stems from the actions of criminal forces that originate and operate in spheres beyond the country’s control. The UNODC estimates that the number of people using cocaine rose from 17 million in 2013 to 25 million in 2023. Production reached 3,708 metric tons in 2024, a 34% increase from the previous year. Colombia alone set a record with 253,000 hectares of coca bush cultivation. Transactions exceeded 2 trillion U.S. dollars (UNODC 2023, p. 10).

The United Nations has sought to address the serious threats posed by organized crime since 1961, when the General Assembly adopted the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. There is an International Drug Control Regime (IDCR) comprising the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the World Health Organization (WHO). In areas related to the criminal drug trade, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also known as the “Palermo Convention”—adopted by the General Assembly in 2000 at and in force since 2003—; and the United Nations Convention against Corruption—adopted in 2003 and in force since 2005. Any objective assessment demonstrates the failure of all these efforts.

The same is true at the hemispheric level. The 2025 Global Organized Crime Index (OC Index), compiled by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), indicates that South America and Central America remain among the regions most affected by organized crime, with countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, and Ecuador among the most threatened globally, due to their role in the logistics and production of controlled

substances (OC Index, 2025, 25). The world's three largest cocaine producers are located in South America: Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, in that order. According to the UNODC, Brazil is the second-largest source country for cocaine reaching Europe (UNODC 2023, 50).

A similar trend observed at the global level has also occurred in the Western Hemisphere. The Organization of American States (OAS) adopted the "Declaration on Security in the Americas" (2003), which recognizes the existence of both traditional and new threats, including Transnational Organized Crime (TOC). The Hemispheric Strategy on Drugs (2010) has also been published, as well as the Declaration of Antigua, Guatemala, "Toward a Comprehensive Policy on the Global Drug Problem in the Americas" (2013); the "Guidelines on Common Policies" (2014); and the "Hemispheric Action Plan on Drugs" (2016–2020). The system includes: the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), the meetings of National Authorities on Trafficking in Persons, the meetings of Ministers of Public Security (MISPA), and the Meetings of National Authorities on Transnational Organized Crime (RANDOT).

2.2 At the Neighborhood Level

The violence plaguing Ecuador stems from its geographic location, situated between Colombia—the world's largest cocaine producer—and Peru, the second-largest player in this criminal trade. According to the UNODC report, Colombia accounts for between 60 and 70% of coca cultivation and potential cocaine production. Coca cultivation in Colombia increased from 96,000 hectares in 2015 to 146,000 in 2016 (a 52% increase) (UNODC 2017, p. 16). The departments of Nariño, Putumayo (bordering Ecuador), and Norte de Santander accounted for 63% of the country's total coca production. During the turbulent years between 2019 and 2021, cultivation increased by 43% and cocaine production by 14%, "reaching record levels in both cases and driving global totals to the highest levels ever recorded" (UNODC 2023, p. 50).

The problem has its roots in the previous century, with the emergence of the Medellín and Cali cartels. The former dominated the criminal drug trade between 1980 and 1993, when Pablo Escobar died. Both organizations used smuggling routes that crossed Ecuadorian territory to ship illicit drugs to North America. Conversely, they sourced so-called chemical

precursors for the industrial-scale processing of coca. With the demise of both organizations, drug trafficking fragmented and soon came under the control of Mexican cartels in the most profitable segments of the business.

"The violence plaguing Ecuador stems from its geographical position between Colombia—the world's largest cocaine producer—and Peru, the second-largest."

At the same time, the Colombian government was waging a bloody war against various Marxist-oriented armed groups, initially financed by communist powers and later also by drug trafficking. By the end of the 20th century, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were operating with thousands of combatants on more than thirty fronts. With the end of the Cold War, external funding was suspended.

On many occasions, various governments attempted a negotiated solution to the conflict, but they always failed: Belisario Betancur (1982–1986) with the La Uribe Accords (or Ceasefire, Peace, and Truce Accords) with the FARC- EP guerrillas; Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) with the Medellín Cartel; César Gaviria (1990–1994) with the Medellín and Cali cartels; Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) with the FARC; Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) with the drug-trafficking paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC); Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) resumed peace talks in Havana, Cuba, in 2012, and in November 2016 the final Peace Agreement was signed; however, the agreed-upon demobilization was only partial, and the power vacuum left by that organization—far from being filled by the state—fell under the control of various dissident groups; and the current president, Gustavo Petro (2022...), maintains a policy of "Total Peace" with the Clan del Golfo (Gaitanist Army of Colombia – EGC) and other criminal gangs such as the Central General Staff (EMC). The results, to date, point to yet another failure.

Faced with the impossibility of reaching a negotiated peace agreement, President Andrés Pastrana signed “Plan Colombia” with the United States, which was implemented with particular intensity during the administration of Álvaro Uribe, who, together with the Armed Forces, led a massive and successful offensive.

Colombia’s internal war spread into Ecuadorian territory. The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—a far-right drug trafficking organization linked to Medellín Cartel kingpins—sowed terror along the border with Ecuador in the area of the San Miguel and Mataje rivers, in the provinces of Sucumbíos and Esmeraldas, respectively. This was not the case with the FARC, which controlled coca bush plantations, processing facilities, and drug trafficking routes along the border with Ecuador. It was often said at the time that, to the north, Ecuador bordered the FARC. It was not in the criminal group’s interest to expand its military operations into Ecuador to use its territory as a kind of strategic rear base for security and logistical purposes. On March 1, 2008, the Colombian Armed Forces attacked a FARC base that was operating with impunity on Ecuadorian territory. The so-called “Operation Phoenix” was ordered by President Uribe in clear violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were suspended for more than two years.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought international trade—and, consequently, the cocaine trade—to a standstill; Governments eased controls to address the health emergency; as a result, in Colombia, the areas planted with coca bushes, as well as the production of cocaine base paste and cocaine hydrochloride, increased; the decline in demand affected prices (in the Department of Nariño, the price of a kilo of cocaine base paste fell from \$975 to \$240). To offset their losses, criminal gangs turned to other activities such as illegal mining, human trafficking, and the smuggling of medical supplies. 2020 was a year of consolidation and expansion for the FARC dissident groups, both inside and outside Colombia.

Consequently, while the problem was serious when the FARC operated along the shared border, it is now even worse due to the multitude of Colombian actors operating directly or indirectly within Ecuadorian territory: the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC or Clan del Golfo), various FARC dissident

groups, and more than 38 smaller criminal groups that operate autonomously and establish their own rules in the territories they control, without a vertical chain of command (UNODC 2023, p. 141).

3. VULNERABILITIES

Having clarified the nature of the threats and considering that they affect many countries around the world and on the continent, the severity of the situation in the case study can be explained by analyzing the vulnerabilities of the Ecuadorian state.

3.1 Political Sphere

Vague and contradictory provisions in the Constitution. In the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, adopted in 2008, terms such as “national security,” “public safety,” and “human security” are used arbitrarily; it stipulates that security is the exclusive and sole responsibility of the “central government”; it provides for the application of a principle of “universal citizenship,” eliminating all controls on the entry of foreigners; and it establishes contradictory functions for the National Police.

Absence of a state policy and a security doctrine. Ecuador once had a solid and efficient security system, while also developing a doctrine to address both external and internal threats; however, since 2008, each successive government has radically altered the management of security. President Rafael Correa dismantled the existing structure, describing it as an imposition of the “American Empire.” During President Lenín Moreno’s term, in an effort to streamline the state apparatus, the Security Council, the Security Secretariat, and the ministries of Security Coordination, Justice, and the Interior were abolished and replaced by a Ministry of the Interior and ministerial security cabinets. President Guillermo Lasso reinstated key institutions such as the Security Council and its Secretariat, reformed the legal framework, and approved a plan that was never implemented—due, among other reasons, to the brevity of his term. The current president declared the existence of an International Armed Conflict, abandoned what little his predecessor had managed to restore, and is managing the internal conflict as an exclusively police-military matter, led by the Minister of the Interior.

The judiciary has been co-opted to a significant extent by organized crime. The “Metástasis” case, investigated by the Attorney

General's Office, revealed the deep penetration of drug trafficking into the judicial and police systems. By the end of 2024, sentences had been handed down against 20 defendants, including a former president of the Judicial Council. This investigation led to a new probe, dubbed "Purga," which examined judicial corruption in the Provincial Court of Guayas. Another case, "León de Troya," addresses corruption in high-level circles linked to political power; finally, the "Encuentro" case, which investigates the political influence of the Lebanese mafia, resulted in precautionary measures against a former police commander-in-chief and two other officers.

3.2 Socioeconomic Context

Poverty affects a large portion of the Ecuadorian population. The National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, using data updated as of March 2026, reported an unemployment rate of 2.9%, an adequate employment rate of 32.1%, and an underemployment rate of 19.6%. The income poverty rate stands at 21.4% of the population, and 40% of the rural population lives in extreme poverty. Finally, in terms of multidimensional poverty, 41.7% of the population suffers from deficiencies in health, education, housing, and employment.

Economic stagnation and job insecurity create opportunities for crime. The main victims are young people who are neither studying nor working. Youth unemployment hovers around 23%, with young women being particularly affected. Furthermore, 7 out of 10 young people who work do so in the informal sector, without social security protection or statutory benefits. This facilitates the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents by criminal organizations, as well as an increase in their victimization in various illicit activities.

3.3 The Security Sector

The anti-militarist stance of "21st-Century Socialism," **an echo of the Cold War**, led to the weakening of the military institution. The training of illegal popular militias began; an attempt was made to surreptitiously introduce 10,000 rifles from China as "humanitarian aid"; the Army's command changed nine times in ten years; and efforts were made to break the subordination of enlisted personnel to officers. "The reforms and leadership changes weakened an institution whose greatest enemies are drug trafficking and organized crime, which have begun to erode it.

Democracy emerged weakened" (López & Almeida, 2023, p. 71).



Seizure of 22 metric tons of drugs in the Province of Los Ríos, Ecuador, on January 21, 2024.

Source: Diario el Universo.

<https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/seguridad/drogas-incautaciones-historicas-ecuador-mayores-incautaciones-22-toneladas-vinces-nota/>

The rise of narco-politics, especially when the FARC began financing election campaigns, as documented by Colombian authorities (Santos, 2009, p. 186); cooperative security programs with the United States were abolished; criminal gangs were allowed to take control of the prison system, turning prisons into command and control centers; and some judges and judicial authorities began working for criminals.

Subsequent governments have attempted to repair the damage caused, but this will take a long time—especially if the internal conflict continues to be managed in an improvised and unprofessional manner, "with traditional approaches focused on military, police, judicial, and intelligence operations, which have proven insufficient" (Naranjo, 2020, pp. 57–58). Another source of vulnerability is the conflict of jurisdiction among the institutions responsible for security, which has reached an extreme with the Ministry of the Interior's request for a law that would place the Armed Forces under the authority of the National Police.

CONCLUSIONS

The fight against transnational organized crime is failing due to structural flaws in the global and hemispheric security system. Strategies, programs, and actions exist at the global, regional, and subregional levels, but they are not implemented because, in general, the ideological commitments and interests of those in power take precedence.

Ecuador's problem stems from its geographical location between the two largest producers of coca leaves and cocaine hydrochloride—particularly Colombia—and the spillover of Colombia's political-military conflict and criminal activities into Ecuadorian territory.

The structural weakness of the Ecuadorian state is the main reason why organized crime actors have found its territory to be the safest base for their criminal activities. Changes in doctrine, systems, public policies, and strategies implemented by each government—and, in practice, the absence or volatility of these—undermine the effectiveness of the fight against this threat.

Ecuador requires a multiparty agreement to: a) adopt short-, medium-, and long-term public policies; b) establish an Ecuadorian security doctrine; c) strengthen the security system by providing it with stability and depoliticizing it; and d) incorporate all branches of government, local governments, and organized civil society into security plans.

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COLOMBIA: HUMAN SECURITY AND PUBLIC SECURITY PERFORMANCE (2022–2026)

Doctrinal Transformation and the Limits of State Capacity

Carlos Medina Gallego

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the performance of Colombia's security forces—the Armed Forces, the National Police, and intelligence services—during the administration of Gustavo Petro Urrego, within the framework of the adoption of the Human Security approach.

Drawing on official sources, think tanks, and academic literature, the results are evaluated across three dimensions: (1) illegal armed groups, (2) drug trafficking and transnational organized crime, and (3) citizen security.

The analysis reveals a significant shift in discourse and progress in seizures and the rights-based approach, but also setbacks in critical indicators such as homicides, the expansion of armed groups, and operational weaknesses.

It is concluded that the Human Security policy faces a significant gap between its normative design and effective implementation, stemming from structural limitations of the state. To conclude the essay, elements for the formulation of a public security policy relevant to a society in conflict and in constant change are presented for consideration by government institutions and society.

INTRODUCTION

Colombia's security policy has historically been characterized by a national security approach centered on armed confrontation against insurgencies and internal threats. However, Gustavo Petro Urrego's rise to power in 2022 marked a paradigm shift by proposing the adoption of the Human Security approach, inspired by the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP, 1994) Human Development Report.

This approach redefines the object of security: from state security to individuals and society, prioritizing the protection of life, dignity, and material conditions of existence. Consequently, the security forces were to transition from a counterinsurgency logic to a role of comprehensively protecting the population and guaranteeing rights.

However, this transformation is taking place against a backdrop of ongoing armed conflict, the expansion of drug trafficking, the fragmentation of illegal groups, and the deterioration of urban security.

During the period analyzed, a territorial and organizational expansion of illegal armed groups was observed. Recent reports indicate significant growth in the number of members and in their control over illicit economies. The Clan del Golfo, the ELN, and FARC dissident groups have consolidated their presence in strategic regions, taking advantage of gaps in state control, ceasefires lacking robust verification mechanisms, and the fragmentation of the conflict, among other factors, as well as the changing nature of the conflict and the use of technological tools in the dynamics of the confrontation by illegal armed actors.

Although the security forces have carried out significant tactical operations, these results have not reversed the structural trend of expansion.

Nevertheless, Colombia remains the world's leading producer of cocaine, with record levels of illicit crop cultivation (UNODC, 2023). The government has reported record-breaking seizure figures, demonstrating significant operational capacity in interdiction efforts. However, these achievements have not translated into a substantial reduction in the drug trade due to: the high resilience of criminal networks; the diversification of routes and markets; and the persistence of socioeconomic conditions that favor the illegal economy.

In terms of urban security, the results are mixed, with a negative trend in key indicators, such as the increase or stagnation of the homicide rate; a rise in extortion and kidnapping; and the persistence of urban criminal economies.

Likewise, violence against social leaders continues to be a critical indicator of the weakness of state control in these territories.

Significant limitations have been identified in air

mobility and logistics, interagency coordination, intelligence, and counterintelligence. Furthermore, the doctrinal transition has generated operational uncertainty, particularly regarding the use of force and the prioritization of objectives.

The findings reveal a gap between the normative approach to Human Security and the empirical results. While the doctrinal shift has enabled an ethical and political reorientation, its implementation has been limited by structural factors, such as the weakness of the state in peripheral territories. Misalignment between policy and operations. Adaptive capacity of organized crime. This confirms the thesis that Human Security requires not only political will but also an effective State capacity to guarantee it. Furthermore, it is observed that a reduction in armed conflict does not necessarily imply a decrease in violence but may instead lead to a reconfiguration of criminal dynamics.

The performance of the security forces within the framework of Human Security during the administration of Gustavo Petro Urrego can be characterized as ambivalent. Positive aspects include a reorientation toward the protection of life; a strengthened human rights-based approach; high levels of drug seizures; and the initiation of negotiation processes. However, negative aspects also stand out, such as the expansion of illegal armed organizations; an increase in homicides and high-impact crimes; the persistence of drug trafficking; and operational weaknesses within the security forces.

The Human Security Policy represents a significant conceptual transformation, but its impact has been limited by the inability to translate this doctrinal shift into sustainable results.

1. THE HUMAN SECURITY POLICY (2022–2026)

1.1 Public Safety Challenges

The 2020–2026 period reveals a profound tension between the government's goal of developing a human security policy and the persistence of criminal dynamics that exceed the State's institutional capacity. Although some urban centers saw partial stabilization in certain types of crime, the overall picture shows a rise in territorial insecurity, the strengthening of illegal armed groups, and an increasingly negative public perception.

In terms of lethal violence, homicide rates remained relatively stable between 2022 and 2024, at around 25 or 26 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. However, this statistical stability masks significant regional differences. Cauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Norte de Santander, Chocó, and some areas of the Caribbean and the Amazon continued to face pressure from armed groups, territorial disputes, and illegal economies. Indepaz reported 76 massacres in 2024 and 78 in 2025, indicating a troubling continuation of acts of collective violence.

The most serious deterioration is evident in the expansion of armed groups. The Ideas for Peace Foundation (*Fundación Ideas para la Paz*) warned that Colombia began 2026 in a more fragile state, marked by a 23% increase in the number of members of illegal armed groups and a fierce intergroup confrontation over territorial control. This growth is linked to control over drug trafficking corridors, illegal mining enclaves, extortion revenues, urban criminal economies, and forced recruitment, which includes children and adolescents.

In urban areas, high-impact crimes—particularly theft, extortion, threats, and domestic violence—reinforced the perception of insecurity. The National Police maintained public databases of crime statistics on homicide, theft, extortion, sexual offenses, threats, and domestic violence, which were consulted to verify certain annual figures.

Between 2022 and 2026, official statistics from the Statistical, Criminal, Misdemeanor, and Operational Information System (SIEDCO) of the Colombian National Police reveal a significant transformation in the country's crime landscape, marked by the persistence of lethal violence, the rise in crimes of social coercion, and the expansion of urban and rural criminal economies.

With regard to homicide, Colombia recorded between 13,500 and 13,700 cases annually between 2022 and 2025, with rates of approximately 25–26 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Although some cities reported partial reductions during 2025 and the first quarter of 2026, homicide remained strongly linked to contract killings, drug trafficking, illegal mining, and territorial disputes among criminal organizations. In Bogotá, for example, by 2026 contract killings already accounted for more than 50% of recorded homicides, reflecting a growing professionalization of urban crime; a similar situation

is observed in cities such as Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, and Cúcuta, among other medium-sized cities.

As for theft, the crime with the greatest impact continued to be theft from individuals, with hundreds of thousands of reports each year, especially in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Barranquilla. Although authorities reported gradual decreases between 2024 and 2026 in some types of theft, thefts of cell phones, motorcycles, and from businesses continued to be the main factors contributing to the public's perception of insecurity. At the same time, extortion saw one of the most notable increases of the period: academic studies and police analyses reported increases of more than 13% between 2022 and 2023, a trend that continued in 2024 and part of 2025, establishing itself as one of the country's main urban and rural criminal economies.

Sexual crimes, threats, and domestic violence showed sustained growth during the 2022–2026 period, both in terms of the number of reports and their social impact. National Police statistics reflected thousands of annual reports of sexual crimes, primarily targeting women, girls, and adolescents, with significant increases following the pandemic due to greater institutional and social awareness of the phenomenon. Various regional and national reports showed that between 2023 and 2025, sexual crimes increased in several capital cities, even after slight partial reductions reported in 2025.

Threats also saw sustained growth linked to the territorial control exercised by criminal gangs, illegal economies, and urban social conflict, particularly affecting merchants, community leaders, and citizens subjected to extortion. However, the most concerning phenomenon of the period was domestic violence, considered one of the crimes with the highest relative growth in Colombia. In cities such as Bogotá, reports of such incidents rose rapidly between 2023 and 2026, reaching historically high levels and becoming one of the main factors putting pressure on the judicial and social protection systems. Experts have pointed out that the figures reflect not only a real increase in interpersonal violence but also a greater willingness to report incidents, although a high number of unreported cases persists due to fear, economic dependence, and distrust of institutions.

Overall, statistics from 2022 to 2026 show crime increasingly linked to territorial control, illicit

economies, and everyday social violence, in which public safety ceased to depend exclusively on reducing homicide and came to involve complex crimes such as extortion, kidnappings, threats, and domestic violence.

The period also reveals a “security paradox”: while some official figures may indicate targeted reductions, the public perceives a greater sense of unease. This is because insecurity is not measured solely by the number of reports filed, but also by the daily experience of threats, fear of theft, extortion, the deterioration of social cohesion, impunity, and the sense that the state is absent.

“Human Security requires not only political will but also an effective State capacity to guarantee it.”

1.2 Illegal Armed Groups: Control and Territorial Disputes

During the 2022–2026 period, Colombia underwent a profound reconfiguration of its illegal armed groups, characterized by the fragmentation of traditional structures, the territorial expansion of hybrid organizations, and the consolidation of regional criminal economies linked to drug trafficking, illegal mining, smuggling, extortion, and control of strategic corridors.

Dissident factions of the former FARC-EP ceased to operate as a unified structure and evolved into armed federations with relatively autonomous regional commands, including the so-called Central General Staff and the Segunda Marquetalia, both of which clashed with one another in various territories. At the same time, the National Liberation Army expanded its territorial presence and strengthened its military and financial capacity, particularly in border regions and coca-growing corridors, while the Clan del Golfo consolidated an expansion strategy based on flexible criminal networks, control of illegal revenues,

and local alliances with regional armed groups.

This transformation produced a landscape of multiple and simultaneous conflicts, in which tactical alliances, violent rifts, and ongoing disputes among illegal actors coexisted. In departments such as Cauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Norte de Santander, Chocó, Putumayo, and Arauca, armed conflict ceased to be driven solely by ideological motivations and came to be determined primarily by the control of strategic territories for the accumulation of criminal capital and dominance over illicit economies.

Territorial disputes among these groups during 2022–2026 stemmed primarily from the need to control entire illegal production and export chains, border corridors, clandestine ports, mining enclaves, and communities subjected to coercive economies. The rise in international cocaine prices, the persistence of illicit crops, and the expansion of illegal gold mining transformed vast peripheral regions into areas of high criminal profitability, sparking local wars over control of routes, laboratories, extortion revenues, and de facto territorial governments; the Catatumbo and the southwestern region are clear examples of this phenomenon. Compounding this were the historical weakness of comprehensive state presence and institutional limitations in consolidating security, justice, and sustained social investment in rural and border areas.

In many territories, illegal armed groups acted simultaneously as military structures, economic regulators, and local political authorities, imposing social norms, managing community conflicts, and capturing rents from both legal and illegal activities.

The “Total Peace” policy promoted by the government of Gustavo Petro also produced contradictory dynamics: while it opened avenues for political negotiation and bringing perpetrators to justice, it also created incentives for the expansion and armed repositioning of organizations seeking to strengthen their territorial control ahead of potential agreements. Consequently, the 2022–2026 period was not marked by a structural decline in armed conflict, but rather by a competitive realignment of criminal power in Colombia.

In summary, between 2022 and 2026, public safety in Colombia was shaped by three simultaneous processes: the reconfiguration of armed groups, the expansion of illegal economies, and the erosion of public confidence in the state’s ability to protect life,

liberty, and property. The human security policy enjoyed normative legitimacy but faced severe operational limitations that prevented it from translating into effective territorial control, crime reduction, and real protection for communities.

1.3 Overall Assessment of the Performance of the Security Forces (2022–2026)

The actions of the Colombian Armed Forces and the National Police between 2022 and 2026 were marked by a combination of significant operational achievements and growing strategic limitations in the face of the expansion of organized crime, both domestic and transnational.

During this period, high-impact operations were carried out against drug trafficking structures, illegal mining networks, logistics corridors for cocaine exports, and the leadership of illegal armed organizations. Authorities reported the destruction of cocaine processing laboratories, record-breaking seizures of cocaine hydrochloride, and the disruption of financial networks linked to money laundering.

Similarly, significant operations were carried out against illegal mining enclaves in Antioquia, Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, and southern Bolívar, where dredgers, heavy machinery, and illicit mining networks associated with the financing of armed groups were destroyed. Security forces also succeeded in capturing and neutralizing regional commanders of the Clan del Golfo, dissident groups from the former FARC-EP, and the National Liberation Army, which partially undermined these organizations’ logistical, financial, and mobility capabilities. This was complemented by increased international cooperation in intelligence, maritime interdiction, and the control of transnational drug trafficking routes, particularly with agencies from the United and with Central American countries.

However, the period was also marked by a significant increase in attacks against the security forces and by the military strengthening of illegal organizations in various regions of the country. Between 2022 and 2026, there were multiple ambushes, harassment attacks, and attacks using explosives, snipers, homemade drones, and minefields against military and police units, particularly in Cauca, Arauca, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Antioquia, and the Colombian Pacific region.

The increase in offensive actions by dissident groups and the ELN demonstrated a greater operational capacity than that observed in previous years, including simultaneous attacks against police stations, military outposts, and rural patrols. Casualties among military and police personnel rose during several periods of the four-year term, raising institutional concerns about the deterioration of security conditions in strategic areas. At the same time, the expansion of criminal economies enabled illegal groups to enhance their capacity for recruitment, weapons procurement, payment of combatants, and social control over rural and urban communities. The persistence of international drug trafficking corridors and their links to foreign criminal networks transformed the Colombian conflict into a phenomenon increasingly connected to transnational dynamics of criminal accumulation.

The main limitations of the security forces during the 2022–2026 period were linked to operational, logistical, technological, and institutional constraints in confronting increasingly flexible and decentralized criminal organizations. Various analyses highlighted problems with aircraft maintenance, limitations on air and river mobility, insufficient technological surveillance capabilities, and weaknesses in strategic intelligence and counterintelligence. Added to these were budgetary difficulties stemming from fiscal constraints and political debates over the security approach of Gustavo Petro's government.

In several regions, there was also a lack of coordination between the military presence, the justice system, social investment, and institutional consolidation, which allowed illegal groups to quickly regain areas that had been taken over by the military.

The “Total Peace” policy also generated operational tensions related to partial ceasefires, restrictions on the offensive use of force, and difficulties in coordinating political negotiations with effective territorial control. Consequently, although the security forces maintained the capacity to strike at criminal structures and partially contain their expansion, the 2022–2026 period demonstrated that the fight against organized crime currently requires not only military and police capabilities but also advanced intelligence, a comprehensive state presence, and sustained strategies for economic and territorial control.

2. ELEMENTS FOR FORMULATING A RELEVANT PUBLIC SECURITY POLICY

This section proposes a comprehensive, second-generation Human Security strategy that combines a rights-based approach with the effective strengthening of state capacity through five strategic lines of action: Regaining territorial control; Operational reform of the security forces; A comprehensive strategy against illicit economies; Evidence-based public safety; and Strengthening intelligence and institutional coordination

Line 1: Regaining State Territorial Control

The restoration of state territorial control in Colombia can no longer be understood as an exclusively military operation. The underlying problem—gaps in state authority in peripheral regions—is not solely due to the absence of law enforcement agencies, but to a more complex and structural absence: that of the state as the comprehensive guarantor of rights, provider of public goods, and legitimate regulator of social life. In these historically marginalized territories, illegal armed groups have filled that void, not only through coercion but also through parallel forms of governance, economic regulation, and conflict resolution. Therefore, any strategy aimed at regaining territorial control must be based on a multidimensional understanding of state power.

In this context, the proposal for Strategic Zones for Comprehensive Intervention (ZEII) emerges as a key instrument for establishing an effective state presence. These zones must be defined using rigorous technical criteria, based on risk maps that integrate variables such as the presence of armed actors, illegal economies, indicators of multidimensional poverty, institutional weakness, and social conflict. Territorial prioritization cannot be driven by short-term political considerations but must be based on a strategic analysis that allows resources to be targeted at those areas where the state faces the greatest challenges to its legitimacy and control.

Finally, the recovery of territorial control will only be sustainable if a permanent institutional presence is guaranteed. One of the Colombian state's historical mistakes has been its pattern of episodic intervention: entering territories during times of crisis and subsequently abandoning them, which facilitates the re-establishment of illegal actors. The focus must be on a lasting institutional presence that consolidates

local capacities, strengthens local governments, and builds bonds of trust with citizens. In this sense, the state's deployment must be conceived as a process of building democratic governance, in which security is a necessary—but not sufficient—component of a broader project of territorial integration and social justice.

LINE 2: Operational Reform of the Security Forces

The Colombian security forces are experiencing a structural tension between their constitutional mandate and recent doctrinal shifts. The transition toward a Human Security approach, promoted under the administration of Gustavo Petro, introduced a significant policy change but has not been accompanied by comprehensive operational restructuring. The result has been doctrinal ambiguity that, in practice, translates into uncertainty in tactical decision-making, a decline in operational initiative, and, in some territories, an effective loss of capacity to contain and dismantle illegal armed groups. This disconnect between doctrine and operations has created a vacuum that criminal actors have exploited to expand their territorial control and consolidate illicit economies.

Overcoming this situation requires the development of a hybrid Human Security doctrine that is not limited to normative discourse but translates into clear, coherent, and field-applicable operational guidelines. This doctrine must unambiguously integrate respect for human rights with the effective and legitimate use of force. It is not a matter of choosing between safeguards and decisiveness, but rather of establishing protocols in which both dimensions reinforce one another. In this regard, it is essential to redefine the rules of engagement (ROE) based on criteria of clarity, proportionality, and legal certainty for uniformed personnel. Regulatory uncertainty not only weakens institutional action but also exposes officers to legal risks that ultimately hinder operations.

LINE 3: Comprehensive Strategy Against Illicit Economies

The persistence of drug trafficking in Colombia cannot be understood solely as a criminal phenomenon: it is, above all, an illegal economic structure deeply rooted in historically excluded territories, where the state has been weak or intermittent. The coca economy has

functioned as a system of subsistence, social regulation, and capital accumulation in vast rural areas, linking local actors, transnational networks, and sophisticated financial circuits. Therefore, any strategy that aims to be effective must move away from exclusively repressive approaches and toward a comprehensive policy that simultaneously addresses the territorial conditions, value chains, and financial flows that sustain these economies.

Within this framework, the implementation of a territorial model of productive substitution is central, but it must overcome the mistakes of the past. It is not merely a matter of eradicating crops, but of transforming local economies. This involves designing real, sustainable incentives tailored to the conditions of each territory: access to land, infrastructure, credit, technical assistance, and marketing guarantees. Substitution must be anchored in viable legal markets, preventing farmers from becoming trapped in cycles of failed restructuring. In this regard, public policy must link rural production to formal value chains, including public procurement, partnerships with the private sector, and solidarity economy schemes that ensure stable incomes.

LINE 4: Evidence-Based Public Safety Policy

Colombia's public safety policy currently faces a critical tension between the rise in high-impact crimes—homicide, extortion, aggravated theft—and a growing perception of insecurity that, in many cases, exceeds even the actual incidence of crime. This gap between reality and perception erodes institutional legitimacy, weakens trust in law enforcement, and fuels the expansion of urban criminal economies. The central problem is not merely crime itself, but the state's inability to anticipate it, understand its territorial dynamics, and respond in a differentiated and effective manner.

Given this scenario, it is imperative to develop an evidence-based public safety policy that replaces ad hoc reactions with strategic intelligence. This involves creating a national crime analytics system that integrates disparate information sources—police, the Attorney General's Office, forensic medicine, and local governments—into an interoperable architecture capable of processing data in real time. The key is not to accumulate information, but to transform it into actionable knowledge: identifying patterns, correlations, and trends that enable the anticipation of criminal behavior. The incorporation of predictive

models for identifying critical points must become a central tool in operational planning, allowing resources to be focused on the places and times of greatest risk.

In short, an evidence-based public safety policy requires a structural shift: from reactive control to intelligent anticipation; from scattered action to targeted intervention; from isolated repression to integration with social policies; and from institutional opacity to transparency and participation. Only in this way will it be possible to regain control of urban environments, reduce violence, and restore public trust in the state.

LINE 5: Strengthening the Intelligence System

Strengthening the intelligence system is a structural prerequisite for restoring the state's capacity to anticipate, prevent, and neutralize complex threats, both in the realm of national security and public safety. In the Colombian context, weaknesses in strategic intelligence and counterintelligence not only result in operational failures—such as the inability to foresee the expansion of criminal organizations or the reconfiguration of illicit economies—but also in deep institutional vulnerabilities, manifested in leaks, the co-optation of agents, and the misuse of sensitive information. This situation reveals a fragmented system, with low interoperability among agencies, limited analytical coordination, and a weak culture of intelligence production geared toward strategic decision-making.

A comprehensive reform of the intelligence system must begin with its structural reorganization under a truly interagency model that overcomes the silo mentality among the military, police, civilian agencies, and investigative bodies. This entails the creation of a coordinated national intelligence system, with unified protocols for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information, as well as joint intelligence fusion *centers* that enable the consolidation of data from multiple sources. Eliminating duplication is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency but also a prerequisite for avoiding operational contradictions, improving the quality of analysis, and optimizing the use of technical and human resources.

In short, the transformation of Colombia's intelligence system must be geared toward building a modern, integrated, technologically advanced, and democratically controlled architecture. Only in this way will it be possible to move from a fragmented and

reactive model to a strategic, proactive, and legitimate one, capable of addressing contemporary threats without sacrificing the principles of the rule of law.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2022–2026 period demonstrated that Colombia is facing a profound transformation in the dynamics of violence and organized crime. Illegal armed organizations evolved into more flexible, decentralized structures that are linked to global illicit economies, in which drug trafficking, illegal mining, extortion, and territorial control have established themselves as the main drivers of criminal accumulation.

In this context, the security forces achieved significant results in operational terms and in disrupting illegal structures, but these advances were not sufficient to bring about a structural and sustained reduction in criminal power across large regions of the country.

Likewise, analysis of the period shows that the limitations of Colombia's security forces are not due exclusively to military or police capabilities, but rather to historical problems of comprehensive state presence, institutional weakness, territorial inequality, and the persistence of highly profitable illicit economies. The adaptability of criminal organizations, combined with logistical, budgetary, and intelligence constraints, made it difficult to consolidate territorial control and effectively protect communities affected by violence. Added to this were tensions arising from the negotiation processes and ceasefires promoted under the "Total Peace" policy, which, in some cases, coexisted with the expansion and armed strengthening of illegal actors.

The patterns of criminal activity and armed conflict between 2022 and 2026 demonstrate that Colombia's Human Security policy requires a multidimensional strategy that combines the operational capacity of the security forces, advanced strategic intelligence, strengthening of the justice system, financial control of criminal economies, and a sustained state presence through social investment, infrastructure, education, and territorial development. Without effective coordination between security, governance, and the economic transformation of conflict-affected territories, operational achievements will remain partial and temporary in the face of criminal organizations with a high capacity for adaptation and

regional expansion.

The findings reveal a gap between the normative approach to Human Security and empirical results. While the doctrinal shift has enabled an ethical and political reorientation, its implementation has been limited by structural factors, such as the weakness of the state in peripheral territories. Mismatch between policy and operations. Adaptive capacity of organized crime. This confirms the thesis that Human Security requires not only political will but also an effective state capacity to guarantee it. Furthermore, it is observed that a reduction in armed conflict does not necessarily imply a decrease in violence but may instead lead to a reconfiguration of criminal dynamics.

The performance of the security forces within the framework of Human Security during the administration of Gustavo Petro Urrego can be characterized as ambivalent. *Positive aspects* include a reorientation toward the protection of life; a strengthened human rights-based approach; high levels of drug seizures; and the initiation of negotiation processes. However, *negative aspects* also stand out, such as the expansion of illegal armed organizations; an increase in homicides and high-impact crimes; the persistence of drug trafficking; and operational weaknesses within the security forces.

The Human Security policy represents a significant conceptual transformation, but its impact has been limited by the inability to translate doctrinal change into sustainable results.

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THE GREAT CHALLENGE OF ENSURING HEMISPHERIC SECURITY WITHOUT REPEATING THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST

Bernardo Gortaire-Morejón

The deterioration of living conditions in the Americas is striking. While it is true that macroeconomic indicators—particularly in terms of gross domestic product—have rebounded in the five years following the pandemic, as has been rightly pointed out from a development perspective, this figure is not a good indicator of national well-being (Llena-Nozal, Martin & Murtin, 2019). GDP can be misleading, especially in models where wealth distribution is inadequate. Latin America has historically been a prime example of such mismanagement. (Calvo-González, 2024; see also Gortaire Morejón, 2024).

According to evidence gathered over the past few decades, unequal societies tend to be more violent (Wolf, Rebecca & Seena, 2014). This is linked to perceptions of injustice and the feeling that institutional channels are not valid means for achieving personal and community goals (Sakstrup & Henrikas, 2024). In this regard, the absence of a welfare state in the Americas (with exceptions, such as Canada, and significant limitations in Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay) is one of the key factors in understanding the high rates of violence and crime.

Numerous studies acknowledge the weakness of the state in Latin American countries. Mazzuca (2021) traces this back to the very origins of Latin American statehood, within a context of late integration into the global system and market, assigning the region's states a secondary role as suppliers of raw materials, with extractivist institutions serving the agendas of more industrialized countries in Europe and, later, the United States (Mazzuca, 2021).

This latter factor must be a central focus in decision-making to ensure security. As lessons from the political cycles of the early decades of the 21st century show, it seems clear that a stance of distancing and hostility toward the United States has not been effective in spurring regional development, much less in containing the hybrid threats that have emerged, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor, however, is it viable to completely abandon planning that acknowledges the existing power

asymmetry between the United States—as the continental “hegemon”—and its strategic interests in the region, compared to Latin America’s own agenda.

In some quarters, the concept of security is narrowly confined to thinking exclusively about acts of force and legitimate state violence, while ignoring the other dimensions necessary to achieve a state of security. Security is not the absolute elimination of the threat, primarily because achieving that state requires unrestricted control over all of the state’s internal and external processes—something that is either unattainable or dangerous. At one point, while speaking with a former security minister from a Central American country, he mentioned that “dictatorships tend to be quite secure.” What is the problem with this? While it is true that violations of the law by non-state and civilian actors are drastically reduced, in all historical examples the overreach of the state and its security forces ultimately transforms the state apparatus itself into a threat.

Drawing on concepts from biology, this process of authoritarian securitization operates like an autoimmune disease. The mechanisms and bodies dedicated to protecting the state’s most important core—which is none other than society itself—end up identifying society as a target, violating rights and freedoms, and, in the worst cases, acting as a brake on the state’s development, prosperity, and capacity for growth relative to its neighboring and international counterparts.

The crux of the matter lies in finding a formula that, without criminalizing its own cells, allows for the maximum reduction of security breaches. Once again, absolute sterility is not feasible. Just as in medicine, the overuse of antibiotics and disinfectants sooner or later opens the door to pathogens that are more dangerous to the body. The problem of “superbugs” is a pressing concern in the international medical community that could put the survival of the human species itself at risk.

In this comparative context, relying on security mechanisms that aim to create a scenario in which everything is controlled by the state should not be the goal, as this runs the risk of fostering more violent and dangerous threats to the state’s stability. Latin America experienced a long cycle of governments whose aspiration to bring order and structure to their countries led them to resort to military rule, often supported and encouraged by the United States

through its political decision-makers and intelligence agencies, as such regimes were considered useful for ensuring order, stability, the anti-communist agenda, and the protection of economic interests in the region (Schmitz, 2006).

Resistance, bolstered by the Soviet Union and its satellites such as Cuba, led to long and bloody asymmetric internal wars, which also served as a breeding ground for the growth of illicit economies. The absence of legal and political channels to resolve internal conflicts opened the floodgates for drug trafficking and other associated crimes to become sources of funding for armed groups (Palma, 2021). The “success” of this strategy was such that, even after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, armed groups continued to operate using resources obtained on the black market.

Another response from the system was the rise of political movements linked to the “21st-century socialism” movement, with leaders who had even had direct connections to or participated in groups that, decades earlier, had been identified as terrorists and threats to the state. Among the strategies implemented during the first five-year periods of the 21st century was a reconfiguration of the paradigm for responding to armed and criminal violence, focusing on approaches based on dialogue, tolerance, and the pursuit of development-centered agreements (Hamburger & Álvaro, 2014).

This became a period of relative regional stability, and several countries experienced a period of relative calm, improvements in living conditions, and even an opportunity to redefine the region’s position relative to its global peers—even as the United States took on a more distant and less interventionist role in regional decision-making (Levitsky & Roberts, eds., 2011). However, this cycle failed to break with historical regional patterns characterized by corruption scandals and abuses of authority against democratic institutions; it has even been accused of contributing to a deterioration in the capabilities of security forces and justice systems to respond to actors involved in organized crime (International IDEA 2016; see also Sánchez Berzain, 2022). In contrast, other groups argue that the contributions of this political proposal in the implementation of social plans and programs reduced crime rates and levels of violence, while improving economic growth and social well-being (Fourniere Bayardi, 2017).

Meanwhile, U.S.-led globalization failed to ensure an equitable redistribution of benefits across all segments of global society. Even domestically, the outsourcing of industrial capacity to other countries—in search of cheaper labor and fewer regulatory controls—led to the hollowing out of the industrial engine that had propelled the United States to its status as a world power (Gortaire, 2023). The educational system, championed by Ford in the early 20th century, was not reformed, and new generations of *blue-collar* workers saw their purchasing power increase for a time; however, subsequent economic crises—such as the 2008 housing bubble and the one triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrated that their standard of living was not comparable to that of their parents.

The American dream of a single-income household where one person works only during the week—able to cover all household expenses, at least one car, a family vacation once a year, and the occasional treat—had become unattainable. Of course, modernity demanded more luxuries; it was no longer just about a television in the living room, but a personal computer in every pocket (an *iPhone* or other *smartphone*), a *tablet*, a *laptop*, a *smartwatch*, and so many other *gadgets* that are considered “priorities” both for status and to keep up with peers. But then it became increasingly evident that the Western model was not without its flaws.

The losers of globalization were not only in developing countries but also within the global powers themselves. In these contexts, the blow of injustice is even more evident. In less developed countries, the argument that they belong to a weak nation lacking capabilities mitigates and dampens demands for greater benefits; indeed, the lack of access to the wonders of modernity makes them seem less necessary. In contrast, in one of the cradles of innovation, these shortcomings become a source of distress and discontent. This has opened the door to a populist and demagogic approach to U.S. politics, undermining the quality of its democracy (V-Dem Institute, 2026).

This problem would be less acute were it not for the crisis in the healthcare sector. The privatization of what is a basic right in other countries has exacerbated national unrest and contributed to the search for mechanisms of distraction through illicit substances. The United States already suffered from a deep-seated addiction problem that worsened after

the Vietnam War, during which tens of thousands of veterans had fallen into the trap of narcotic substances. The war on drugs proved unsuccessful; although some criminal ringleaders were captured or killed and their networks were dismantled, in practice the root cause of the problem—consumption—was not addressed.⁵ Furthermore, according to studies on the subject, it has been found that prohibition and state repression focused on ringleaders lead to increased violence (Werb, Rowell, Guyatt, Kerr, Montaner & Wood, 2011; see also UNODC, 2025).

Thus, the current environment has become the perfect breeding ground for instability and insecurity. In the United States (and, increasingly alarmingly, in Europe) lies the cradle of the entire criminal infrastructure: *demand*. Weak Latin American states, unable to provide guarantees to their citizens, complete the cycle through *production* (UNODC, 2025). However, this complex phenomenon is compounded by the evolving nature of the threat. To a large extent, the money generated by drug trafficking is no longer used by armed groups for political or state-related purposes, but rather serves directly as a means of livelihood for organized criminal groups that parasitize the state (Gortaire Morejón, 2022).

The scope for action is entirely different. While it is true that the political sphere has established the notion of “narco-terrorism”—both in reference to acts of extreme violence and as a mechanism to apply the legal frameworks used to respond to extremist groups in the Middle East and Africa—in practice, these threats are not comparable. Terrorist organizations in other parts of the world operate under religious and political ideologies that aim to seize state power; from this perspective, it is even possible to envision a framework for renegotiating and reevaluating the threat. One need only look at what has happened with the current Syrian president, Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa (Abu Mohammad al-Julan), a rebel commander who went from being on the U.S. and United Nations lists of global terrorists to becoming a partner in the transition following the overthrow of Bashar Hafez al-Assad (Guldogan, 2025).

Although one might consider legal agreements to reduce penalties and ensure effective cooperation in dismantling criminal groups, in practice, a political aspiration must not be confused with a desire for illicit

enrichment. Even in the separation of powers, it must be recognized that some powers are more legitimate than others. In establishing fairer and more equitable systems, the use of force has been justified in the face of tyranny and abuse; however, the use of violence solely for the purpose of profit has no basis in any valid ideological or ethical framework.

“Relying on security mechanisms that aim to create a scenario in which everything is controlled by the state should not be the goal, as this runs the risk of fostering more violent and dangerous threats to the state’s stability.”

With regard to containing and responding to criminal groups and structures that use armed violence to achieve their ends, it is important to recognize that within the framework of international law there are legal gaps, which must be addressed, and amendments must be promoted to make it feasible to distinguish unconventional threats and transform the “gray zone” into a mixed-operation zone that combines the use of force with effective strategies for containing the threat. Consequently, we observe that in some states in the region, the use of states of emergency has been escalated to provide legal authority for military intervention, and the designation of “Organized Armed Groups” (OAGs) has been applied—even to actors who do not strictly fit this category—in an effort to ensure that the rules of international humanitarian law are applied to contain them and to provide a legal framework for military intervention.

In this context, the United States, under its current administration, is aiming for a return to the Monroe Doctrine, with its own corollary, now promoted as the “Donroe Doctrine” (Bremmer & Cliff, 2026). The problem is that the Monroe Doctrine already failed in

⁵ See also: *United States General Accounting Office, Drug Control: Observations on Elements of the Federal Drug Control Strategy*, GAO/GGD-97-42 (Washington, DC: United States General

Accounting Office, March 1997), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/ggd-97-42.pdf>

its time and is the very source of the environment that allowed the current conditions to arise. Nevertheless, no responsibility is acknowledged on this matter; instead, blame is shifted onto political opponents, both domestic and foreign (Ávila, 2025).

The militarization of internal security has also failed; at best, it has merely postponed the threat, but it has been unable to address the root causes, which have become chronic and have worsened.

In this context, the initiative known as “Shield of the Americas” generates hope in some quarters, amid expectations that the United States, through its capabilities in the fields of intelligence and fifth-generation technologies, will be able to “destroy” organized crime groups. However, effectively responding to and combating these groups requires strengthening other institutional pillars, so that security strategies and regional initiatives can succeed in the long term and do not become a threat to the security and sovereignty of the states involved.

Hence, it is necessary to develop parallel strategies to curb drug use in the United States and Europe, as well as measures to stem the “river of steel” that carries unregulated weapons from the United States to criminal groups in Latin America (GI-TOC, 2025).

Another area that needs strengthening is financial intelligence, aimed at identifying the financiers behind the cartels and gangs. Dirty money from drug trafficking and other related crimes forms a massive shadow economy, with little to no transparency.

What happens to the dirty money that enters the formal system? Some suggest that it is simply incorporated into GDP, and in some countries, such as Colombia and Mexico, it even becomes an almost pivotal part of their economies (Correa, 2025; see also Nájara, 2010). And the biggest problem lies in this: What is done with the money that is successfully identified as coming from illicit markets? Are there guarantees that it is used as a mechanism to address its origin, or is it simply used as a demagogic political tool?

The proposal for a security alliance should inspire confidence, but given the current positions and context of a weakening rules-based order, it generates uncertainty—primarily regarding the scope of military operations, as well as the viability of mechanisms that

promote accountability for the implementation of the agreements embodied in this initiative.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Virtually all the technical advances in public policy over the past few decades are being undermined by the public’s fear of criminal groups, leading people to embrace demagogic proposals that are closer to authoritarianism and political patronage than to a modern state. The exploitation of the current system’s shortcomings has also been accompanied by the demonization of various institutions dedicated to the oversight of power, including multilateral organizations (primarily the United Nations, which has been pushed to the brink of internal collapse by the legal straitjacket that limits the scope of its objectives), nongovernmental organizations (accused of being tools of insurgent and criminal actors), academia (discredited and marginalized in its role as a driver of intergenerational change), and the free press (stifled by a lack of resources, infoxication, and false information amplified by bots and troll farms); in the worst-case scenario, these actors are even criminalized.

Thus, although many issues remain unresolved—particularly when delving into other crimes such as illegal mining, logging, and fishing, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling, as well as other crimes that form part of a much broader chain—the final reflection can focus on an urgent call for greater transparency and a democratic spirit in the security proposals currently emerging. As Sabine Kurtenbach (2023) argues:

Comprehensive, long-term policies are needed to address the historical and structural violence experienced in Latin America. These must include the delegitimation of the use of violence and public policies to reduce social inequalities. Violence prevention must also focus on reducing impunity, reforming the security sector, and prioritizing the rule of law and human rights.” (Kurtenbach, 2023).

If current generations do not learn from the mistakes of the past, and these mistakes are repeated out of foolishness and indifference, the only certainty is that future generations will have to grapple with the same problems under less promising conditions and at the risk that there will be no institutions capable of mitigating the very threat that the state apparatus can pose to its citizens.

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