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Colombia After the 2026 Election: Security, Regional Diplomacy and Strategic Balancing

By Isabella Oslinger

Introduction

Colombia enters a new political cycle after the closest presidential run-off in its history. Abelardo de la Espriella, representing the right, narrowly defeated Iván Cepeda the left-wing candidate associated with President Petro's governing coalition. Less than one percentage point separated the country from two sharply different political futures. De la Espriella took office on the 7th of August, setting Colombia on a different political course while inheriting an electorate divided between two competing projects and high demands from international partners. This transition coincides with greater regional visibility and persistent national insecurity. Geopolitically, Colombia's position between the Andes, the Caribbean and northern South America carries an important diplomatic weight, where its decisions can affect border security, maritime routes, migration and relations with crucial allies such as the United States. Yet, its efforts to gain greater strategic autonomy are being overshadowed by a harsh reality:

armed conflict and illicit economies persistently undermine state presence in key parts of the country. How far can Colombia expand its external influence while domestic authority remains uneven? The answer lies in the new administration's ability to handle these tensions, which will define Bogotá's regional role and the credibility of its foreign policy agenda.

From the Peace Agreement to the New Security Agenda

The 2016 Peace Agreement changed the security situation by ending the historical conflict with FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). While its implementation reduced one source of organised violence, it did not achieve a greater public authority across single abandoned areas. In several regions, dissident factions, other armed organisations and criminal networks moved into former FARC strongholds and competed for routes, local economies and political influence.

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Petro's administration placed negotiation, territorial development and the social causes of violence as the core of its security policy. The "Total Peace" agenda reflected the fragmented nature of the post-agreement conflict, although its results varied across regions and negotiating processes. These unresolved questions will now pass to an administration with a different security program. De la Espriella campaigned on stronger action against armed groups, greater use of coercive measures and closer cooperation with the U.S. Yet, his government will inherit many of the territorial and institutional limitations faced by its predecessors. Policy can change quickly, but restoring public authority in contested regions requires time, resources and continuity. Security will be one of the new administration's crucial challenges. The current situation compounds the fragmentation that existed prior to the peace process: various organisations are vying for control of border corridors, cultivation areas, export routes and revenues from illegal mining and extortion. In some regions, they also regulate economic activities, impose restrictions on communities and administer forms of local justice. The control they exercise varies from one territory to another, making it difficult for Bogotá to deliver a uniform response. Colombia´s security problem transcends the 'narco-narrative', armed groups also compete for territory, routes and local economies. Some maintain relatively well-defined command structures; others operate through unstable alliances, regional fronts or networks of intermediaries. The result is a shifting interplay in which an operation against one group may benefit another or displace violence to a neighbouring municipality. Military action retains a central role, but its effects are often temporary when civilian authorities fail to occupy and administer the recovered areas.

De la Espriella campaigned on action against armed groups, use of coercive measures and cooperation with the U.S.

De la Espriella has announced that he will dismantle the main mechanisms of the "Total Peace" policy from the 7th of August and reactivate arrest warrants against members of armed groups. Petro's initiative recognized that the policy produced mixed results. Some dialogues temporarily reduced violence or opened channels of communication, whilst others proceeded without sufficiently clear conditions and were exploited by groups that continued to recruit, expand their spheres of influence or vie for new sources of revenue. The incoming government therefore inherits a double dilemma: negotiations without verification can weaken the state, while coercion without a territorial strategy can reproduce the same cycle.

Beyond Eradication: Colombia´s Anti-Drug Policy at a Crossroad

Petro´s anti-drug policy produced several concrete gains. Cocaine seizures reached record levels, judicial cooperation remained active and voluntary crop-substitution programs expanded. His government also gave greater weight to rural development and to the situation of communities living in coca-growing areas. These measures broadened a policy that had long been dominated by elimination. Nevertheless, they were not enough to reverse the expansion of coca cultivation. In 2024, Colombia recorded around 261,000 hectares under coca cultivation, almost half of them located in ten municipalities in Nariño, Cauca, Norte de Santander and Putumayo. This concentration provides the next government with clearly defined geographical targets, but it does not simplify the process of intervention. The main enclaves are located in areas where armed groups are present, local economies are dependent on the agriculture, and public infrastructure is limited. There, eradication disrupts livelihoods, power balances and community relations, and can lead to the crop being relocated to local districts or those that are more difficult to access.

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De la Espriella has announced a return to a more coercive policy, including aerial spraying using drones and biological agents, alongside increased pressure on the leadership of armed organisations. However, its implementation will rely on legal and environmental requirements, judicial decisions, operational capacity and coordination with local authorities. Even when eradication reduces the cultivated area, its effect on cocaine output may remain limited, as higher yields, more efficient processing and the adaptability of criminal networks can offset part of the decline. Here is where the new administration will have to define what counts as success. Seizures, arrests and hectares eradicated show immediate and politically visible results. They offer less insight into whether the affected regions are becoming more stable. This requires time, functioning roads and public services, access to justice, protection for community leaders and economic alternatives that remain viable once security operations end. Coercion alone may reshape the criminal scheme without reducing local dependence on illegal economies. Development programs on their own are equally unlikely to succeed where armed organizations

control territory and strategic routes. The government will need to combine coercion with development and maintain both beyond a single presidential term.

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The consequences extend directly to Europe. Colombian cocaine reaches European markets through the Caribbean, West Africa and continent's main ports. Decisions taken in Bogotá will affect trafficking routes, criminal adaptation and the direction of international cooperation. For European partners, coca-eradication will have limited value unless it is accompanied by stronger judicial institutions, investment in vulnerable regions and viable economic alternatives for communities in coca-growing areas. Colombia's anti-drug policy will be implemented nationally; however, its effects reach far beyond the country's borders.

Latin America and the Caribbean: A Changing Regional Balance

Colombia's regional position stems from its geography. The country is part of the Andean world, the Caribbean and the Amazon basin, and shares one of the continent's longest and most complex borders with Venezuela. People, goods, energy resources and illicit economies flow through its coasts and border areas. This location extends Colombia´s influence, but also exposes the country directly to the crises of its neighbours. Venezuela lies at the heart of the relationship with the wider region. During Gustavo Petro's administration, Bogotá re-established diplomatic channels with Caracas and sought to combine political dialogue with the management of practical issues, such as cross-border trade, migration, security and the presence of armed groups. The results were limited, although the stabilization of relations made it possible to re-establish the dialogue that both countries need. The border cuts through communities, economic routes and areas where decisions taken by one government have a rapid impact on the other.

During Gustavo Petro's administration, Bogotá re-established diplomatic channels with Caracas.

Political change in Colombia will alter the tone, but is unlikely to eliminate that need. Although Abelardo de la Espriella has strongly criticized the Venezuelan government and appears to be moving closer to Washington, the early appointment of an ambassador to Caracas signals the new administration's intention to keep diplomatic channels open. The decision is driven by specific interests. Colombia needs border cooperation, mechanisms to manage migration and some degree of coordination in dealing with groups operating on both sides of the border. Political differences will shape relations with Caracas, but geography will keep dialogue necessary. De la Espriella´s victory also

places Colombia within a broader conservative turn in the region. Argentina´s President Javier Milei and Ecuador´s Daniel Noboa quickly welcomed the election outcome, while the new Fujimori administration in Peru described it as part of new political direction in Latin America. De la Espriella has repeatedly presented Nayib Bukele's security model as a reference for his own agenda. These affinities may support closer coordination on crime, borders and relations with Washington, but they do not yet amount to a unified regional bloc. Neverthless, Colombia will join the US-backed Shield of the Americas, with Medellín serving as its headquarters. Although the regional pendulum has moved sharply to the right, the alignment is not settled. Brazil's presidential election on the 4th of October, with a possible second round on the 25th, will be the next major test. Given Brazil's economic scale and diplomatic weight, the result could either consolidate this conservative axis, or preserve a powerful counterweight in South America.

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The Caribbean broadens this picture. It is a crucial trade route and, at the same time, a corridor for the trafficking of cocaine, arms and people. The region is also a hotbed of maritime disputes, energy vulnerabilities and a growing presence of external actors. For Colombia, gaining influence in this arena requires more than just diplomatic engagement. It demands a consistent maritime policy, cooperation with small island states and coordination on port security. The Petro government sought to reinforce the country's Caribbean identity and give it greater visibility in regional debates. The incoming administration appears inclined to reorder these priorities around security and a closer relationship with the U.S. De la Espriella's announced diplomatic changes make this shift concrete. De la Espriella's plans to cut relations with Cuba and Nicaragua, close 14 embassies and around 15 consulates, halt the planned mission in Palestine and restore Colombia's diplomatic presence in Israel. The reorganisation signals a clear break with Petro's broader diplomatic expansion, though it also reduces channels that may prove useful in future negotiations or regional crises.

The US, China and the EU: A New Hierarchy of Partnerships

The U.S. will remain central to Colombia's foreign policy, building on decades of cooperation in security, counternarcotics, trade and institutional exchange. Although relations under Petro were marked by differences in tone and priorities, the bilateral framework remained intact. De la Espriella's victory now points to a period of closer political alignment. Donald Trump endorsed him during the campaign, congratulated him after the election and publicly welcomed the result, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio highlighted regional security, irregular migration and economic ties as areas for renewed cooperation. These priorities closely reflect the new President's own agenda. De la Espriella's announcement that Colombia will join the US-led Shield of the Americas gives this bilateral reset an immediate security dimension and signals that Washington will take centre stage from the beginning of the new administration.

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This political affinity may accelerate intelligence sharing, interdiction and operations against armed organisations. It also risks narrowing a relationship already dominated by security and drugs. Colombia needs investment, market access and technological cooperation, while Washington seeks reliable partners in strategic sectors. The durability of this new phase will depend on whether both governments can broaden cooperation beyond coercive priorities.

China presence has grown through trade, infrastructure, technology and investment.

China occupies a different position. China presence has grown through trade, infrastructure, technology and investment, and De la Espriella has little incentive to abandon a partner that offers finance and market access. It is likely, however, that a closer relationship with Washington will lead to greater caution regarding projects related to telecommunications, critical infrastructure or strategic resources. For Bogotá, the problem is not one of formally choosing between the U.S. and China. The difficulty will lie in deciding where to accept investment, under what conditions and with what level of oversight. A broad economic relationship with Beijing can coexist with a close political alliance with Washington, but such a combination requires consistent criteria. Decisions taken on a case-by-case basis, without a clear guiding principle, increase exposure to external pressures and reduce the country's negotiating power.

EU's relationship with Colombia has centered on trade, rural development, human rights, institutional strengthening and support for peace-building.

The European Union maintains a presence less associated with competition between major powers. EU's relationship with Colombia has centered on trade, rural development, human rights, institutional strengthening and support for peace-building. This approach may prove particularly valuable during the next government's term. Faced with a national agenda more focused on coercion and territorial control, Europe can sustain civil and economic programs that require continuity and which tend to produce less visible results in the short term. It will also have to find a way to collaborate with the new administration without neglecting its focus on transitional justice, the protection of communities and the implementation of the peace agreement. The change of government appears to restore a more explicit priority to Washington, but it is unlikely to erase the ground gained by Beijing or the relationship built with Brussels. Colombia has several key partners and a geographical position that attracts external interest. The test will be to translate this attention into a coherent foreign policy. The U.S. may set the initial tone, but relations with China and the EU will show how much room Colombia retains.

Conclusion: From Political Change to Effective Governance

The arrival of De la Espriella marks a new phase of closer ties with the U.S and a likely tightening of security, anti-drug policy and regional relations. This shift will be evident from the outset, but its scope will depend on the government´s ability to implement sustainable policies. Decisions on crop reduction, armed groups, transitional justice and diplomatic presence will face legal constraints, administrative limitations and resistance in those areas where the state's authority remains weakest.

Colombia will continue to occupy a central position in northern South America and the Caribbean. Its relationship with Venezuela affects border management, migration and regional security; its policy on cocaine influences the routes supplying European markets; and its ties with Washington impact the political balance in Latin America. The new government's approach may strengthen coordination between conservative administrations in the region, although such convergence does not eliminate national differences nor guarantee a common strategy.

For Europe, the interest in Colombia goes beyond the continuation of cooperation programs. The country brings together several issues that directly affect the European agenda: organised crime, cocaine trafficking, regional stability, the protection of rights and competition for economic influence. The EU will have to decide how to preserve its role in peace, territorial development and institutional capacity within a Colombian foreign policy that is more focused on Washington and on short-term security outcomes.

The 2026 transition will undoubtedly reshape Colombia's priorities and alliances, but the country's future influence will be determined not by the speed of this political shift, but by the strength and durability of the institutions behind it. The new administration must reconcile security operations with territorial development, closer alignment with Washington with constructive relations with Europe and China, and the demand for immediate results with the long-term implementation of peace. Ultimately, Colombia's credibility domestically, across Latin America and among its international partners, will depend on whether it can transform political change into effective governance. The decisive test for De la Espriella's presidency will therefore be not simply the direction in which he takes the country, but whether the Colombian state has the capacity to follow that direction beyond a single electoral cycle.

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