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A Stronger Colombia Can Help to Counter Growing Hemispheric Insecurity and Criminal Violence

Cooperation partnership:
Insituto de Ciencia Política Hernán Echevarría Olózaga (ICP)
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David M. Luna
Executive Director, ICAIE

Executive Director
Carlos Augusto Chacón Monsalve

INTRODUCTION

The Instituto de Ciencia Política Hernán Echavarría Olózaga (ICP) publishes this paper by David M. Luna within the framework of the cooperation partnership between the International Coalition Against Illicit Economies (ICAIE) and the ICP, aimed at strengthening analysis and policy proposals regarding transnational organized crime, illicit economies, and emerging security threats in Colombia and across the hemisphere.

The paper, *A Stronger Colombia Can Help to Counter Growing Hemispheric Insecurity and Criminal Violence*, offers a particularly relevant approach to understanding the transformation currently reshaping the regional security environment. Its main contribution lies in moving beyond a fragmented reading of different illicit economies and criminal organizations and instead analyzing them as part of a single ecosystem of criminal convergence. Drug trafficking, illicit gold extraction, smuggling, arms and human trafficking, counterfeiting, money laundering, and other illicit activities do not

necessarily operate as separate markets. Increasingly, they share routes, logistics infrastructure, facilitators, financial mechanisms, corruption networks, and institutional vulnerabilities.

This perspective directly aligns with one of the key approaches that the ICP Policy Lab on Security and Defense has been advancing. Contemporary criminal structures must be understood as adaptive networks, capable of diversifying their sources of financing, rapidly replacing lost nodes, modifying their routes, penetrating legal economic activities, and exploiting failures in state coordination. For that reason, targeting individual organizations, leaders, or illicit revenue streams may produce important operational results, but it rarely changes the functioning of the criminal system on a lasting basis.

Luna's analysis shows why the strategic objective must go beyond increasing seizures or arrests. The priority should be to systematically reduce the power of criminal networks by simultaneously disrupting their finances, infrastructure, logistics, corridors, facilitators, corruption mechanisms, and areas of territorial control. This requires moving from an approach focused primarily on fighting individual crimes toward a strategy aimed at dismantling criminal networks and illicit value chains.

In our L3P proposal, *A Programmatic Roadmap to Unleash the Potential of People and the Country*, the security pathway calls for recovering the State's strategic initiative, strengthening intelligence, anticipation, and response capabilities, and improving coordination among the Armed Forces, the National Police, the Office of the Attorney General, and territorial authorities. This entails advancing toward an interoperable security architecture supported by modern technological capabilities, strategic, criminal, and financial intelligence, and operations aimed at dismantling the command, financing, logistics, and support networks that sustain criminal organizations.

The paper also introduces an essential dimension. Colombia's security cannot be analyzed solely within its national borders. Criminal organizations operate through regional corridors, use ports, borders, financial systems, and logistics chains spanning multiple countries, and build alliances with Latin American and extra-regional organizations. Colombia therefore sits at the intersection of many of these flows, while also possessing the institutional, operational, and international cooperation experience that could once again make it a decisive actor in hemispheric security.

This explains the importance Luna assigns to intelligence sharing, coordinated investigations, financial intelligence, asset recovery, and joint operations. International cooperation should produce concrete operational results against transnational networks, corridors, and financial structures. At the ICP, we have similarly argued that hemispheric cooperation must

strengthen the State's ability to adapt to organizations that operate across institutional and national boundaries.

Another fundamental contribution of the paper is the relationship it draws between security, institutions, and markets. Illicit economies finance violent organizations, generate corruption, capture institutions, penetrate legitimate economic activity, and undermine competition and investment. When these networks gain control over territories, ports, logistics chains, local governments, or economic sectors, they become a threat to the rule of law, liberal democracy, and economic freedom.

This perspective also aligns with our *Recommendations for National Defense, Human Security, and Peacebuilding*, which call for stronger coordination between national and territorial levels of government, enhanced local information and intelligence capabilities, and a sustained state presence in territories affected by criminal economies. Restoring territorial control must be accompanied by an effective justice system, institutions capable of enforcing the law, and mechanisms that prevent criminal structures from reconstituting themselves.

Finally, the paper reinforces an idea that is particularly relevant for Colombia. The country is not starting from zero. The experience accumulated over decades in confronting cartels, terrorist organizations, and drug-trafficking networks constitutes a strategic asset. Today's threats, however, are more decentralized, technologically capable, transnational, and financially sophisticated. The objective is to adapt the principal lessons of that experience to a new strategic environment.

In this regard, David Luna's work reinforces a discussion that the ICP Policy Lab on Security and Defense considers essential. Colombia must move from managing isolated manifestations of insecurity toward building a state capacity capable of understanding, anticipating, deterring, and dismantling complex criminal systems.

Security must enable people to live free from violence and fear, allow the State to exercise its legitimate authority effectively throughout the national territory, and ensure that institutions and markets can function without being subjected to the power of criminal structures. Achieving this objective requires rebuilding capabilities, integrating intelligence and technology, targeting illicit finance, strengthening the justice system, securing territorial control, and deepening cooperation with countries that face the same threats.

This paper constitutes a valuable contribution to that agenda and to the broader debate Colombia must undertake regarding the future of its security policy and the role it can once again play in helping build a safer hemisphere.

Carlos Augusto Chacón Monsalve
Executive Director ICP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since assuming power in August 2026, President Abelardo de la Espriella has made the fight against organized crime and illicit trade a top national security priority, as Colombians have decried the growing violence and criminality in their country. Similarly, in recent years across the Americas, other Latin American governments have had to grapple with rising crime in their countries. Hemispheric threats are real and growing, as agile criminals and threat networks destabilize the region, exploit governance weaknesses, and leverage border vulnerabilities to generate tens of billions of dollars in revenue. Whether in Colombia or in other countries in the region, organized crime and illicit trafficking networks are infiltrating governance institutions and penetrating markets to assume greater power and wealth.

Drawing on Colombia's hard-earned experience confronting narco-corruption and the *Medellín* and Cali drug cartels, it should once again provide demonstrable regional leadership by joining the United States, and other committed partners, in fighting narco-terrorism and cross-border threats. Today's challenge, however, is more complex and interconnected, as transnational organized crime, designated terrorist organizations, illicit trade networks, corrupt facilitators, and money launderers increasingly exploit overlapping trafficking routes, logistics infrastructure, financial channels, and border vulnerabilities. Colombia can help lead a new generation of regional cooperation build around intelligence sharing, joint investigations and operations, financial disruption, and coordination action against these interconnected threats.

The Rising Criminality and Insecurity in Colombia

In the past decade, Colombia has struggled to contain violence in cities and rural areas alike, as drug gangs and rebel groups fought over territory abandoned by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, following their 2016 peace deal with the government. Unfortunately, peace never took hold in Colombia, and terror again reigns. In 2025, the country recorded an estimated 15,000 homicides (the highest in a decade) and high levels of kidnappings. This month, Colombia's new government informed the United Nations that over 132,000 people had been killed since the 2016 peace deal. Prisons are overcrowded and armed groups have more than doubled in size as they expand their control of ungoverned spaces and illicit economies within the country, including drug-trafficking corridors, and increasingly, illegal gold extraction.

In regions like Catatumbo, a bloody conflict between rival armed groups, former FARC, National Liberation Army (ELN), the Clan del Golfo have displaced large communities and increased insecurity. Other hot zones in Colombia such as the coastal city of Santa Marta are also expanding a national ecosystem of criminality within the country, and in neighboring countries exploited by cross-border illicit trafficking networks.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Colombia is responsible for an estimated 40% to 50% of the world's total cocaine supply that is reaching record highs in supply and demand markets. In fact, Colombia faces a fragmented criminal economy that generates over $15 billion each year, making cocaine one of the country's top non-energy exports. While Ecuador is not a major producer of cocaine, it has become a superhighway for cocaine and a leading export hub with a dollarized economy. Coca leaf cultivation has also increased in Peru and Central America.

In addition to the use of ports, ships, and sea routes, hundreds of clandestine airstrips help the global distribution including in Venezuela and Peru. An internationally-valued commodity from which the ELN, FARC, and the Clan del Golfo cartel, and other criminal networks such as Tren de Aragua immensely profit from the drug trade especially along the Colombia-Venezuela border. Other criminal activities also include extortion, human smuggling and trafficking, the trade in illegal weapons, alcohol and tobacco products, counterfeit goods, and environmental crimes. The Trade in illegal gold has become another lucrative revenue for criminal networks in Colombia, Venezuela, and the Amazon Basin.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, criminal threat networks, corrupt facilitators and enablers, and money launderers are diversifying and shifting to illicit markets to generate greater revenues due to the low-risk, high-reward nature of illicit trade. From Ecuador and Brazil to Haiti and Honduras, a converging wave of crime and corruption is creating greater insecurity and instability financed by the proceeds of illicit trade. In the process, governments are losing precious revenue through illegal trade practices, criminal evasion of border controls, and cross-border smuggling and trafficking operations.

The strategic implication is that Colombia can no longer address these threats commodity by commodity or agency by agency. Cocaine trafficking, illegal mining, illicit tobacco, arms trafficking, human trafficking and smuggling, counterfeiting, and related financial crimes may involve different actors, but they often exploit overlapping border vulnerabilities, transportation systems, corrupt facilitators, logistics services, and money-laundering channels. This convergence requires an equally integrated enforcement response.

Hemispheric Threats in a World of Crime Convergence

Among the region's new transnational crime trends is an array of illicit goods and contraband flooding economies, either manufactured illegally within the country, or smuggled through poorly secured ports, or across borders from surrounding hubs of illicit trade. A thriving demand for precursor chemicals and synthetic drugs is expanding black markets, which also deal in high volumes of illicit cigarettes; fake electronics and apparel products; counterfeit medicines/pharmaceuticals; and pillaged gold and critical minerals, poached endangered wildlife, and other environmentally-sensitive goods. Criminal networks often use the same supply chains, logistical infrastructure, and illicit service providers to move illicit goods – including cocaine, illegally-extracted gold, counterfeits, and weapon – and dirty money across illicit economies.

The central challenge is crime convergence: illicit markets that may involve different actors increasingly intersect through shared routes, logistics infrastructure, facilitators, financial channels, and governance vulnerabilities. This is what we undertake to demonstrate in our ICAIE partnership with RADOC on our Illicit Shadows projects.

Everything is connected!

Extra-regional actors are also forming alliances with Latin American criminal counterparts, including those from Albania, the Balkans, China, Italy, Turkey and Russia. Corruption and money laundering are rampant in these growing criminalized economies in South America and hubs of illicit trade. The vulnerability of some Free Trade Zones (FTZs) and ports such as the *Port of Guayaquil (Ecuador), the* Port of Chancay (Peru) or the Ports of Santos, Itaqui, and Belém in Brazil continue to be exploited by criminal networks and other bad actors to expand the region's pathways for illegal trade.

Among the growing concerns in Colombia and the Americas is that criminal networks and complicit ruling elites have enabled an environment in which these violent illicit actors have infiltrated government institutions and penetrated industries to wield greater power and yield enormous wealth. Their collective corrupting influence weakens democracy, the international rules-based system, and market integrity.

Illicit trade corrodes the rule of law and undermines a country's investment climate, legitimate commerce, and economic competitiveness. It also disincentivizes innovation as cheap, non-compliant, and dangerous products manufactured in unsanitary conditions enter markets, damaging the reputational value of genuine goods.

When good governance practices, law enforcement policing, and regulatory oversight are endangered or compromised, democracy becomes harder to sustain, allowing impunity to replace the rule of law.

The challenge in many Latin American countries today is that they have become attractive hubs for threat convergence, enabling the arbitrage of illicit goods across borders and serving as low-risk, high reward markets that let criminals profit from illicit trade. The growing complexity and rapid expansion of such illicit markets have pushed these countries to a tipping point. Unless significant intelligence, law enforcement, and financial control reforms are instituted in a sustainable way, Latin America risks seeing additional states and subnational territories increasingly captured or compromised by criminal networks. These are truly existential threats to democratic institutions.

The example of Ecuador over the past five years, with a surge in homicides, the influx of extra-regional transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), extreme violence among groups seeking to control ports, key territory and prisons, offers a dramatic case study of how a country can collapse institutionally unless these challenges are faced directly, forcefully and quickly. On August 20, 2026, the US Treasury sanctioned numerous Ecuador-based criminal networks (Los Choneros and Los Lobos) for drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. These groups also partner with other designated FTOs such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG).

The illicit environment in Ecuador is an excellent demonstration of how criminal alliances are converging and how their extortion and other activities are financing chaos, violence, and insecurity.

For Colombia, Ecuador's experience is a warning that criminal convergence can evolve rapidly from a law-enforcement challenge into a broader national-security and governance crisis when criminal networks gain control over strategic territory, ports, prisons, financial channels, and legitimate economic sectors.

Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and other countries in South America also face a very real risk of spiraling downwards due to organized crime and threat networks similar to those in Ecuador.

In Chile, public and private sector leaders recognize that transnational organized crime and its massive illicit economies present an existential threat to the nation. Chilean President José Antonio Kast has embarked on his **Agenda against Organized Crime and Terrorism (ACOT)** to forcefully take on the challenge of these new and rapidly evolving criminal and security threats to the country and the region. President Kast has also called for regional cooperation to tackle transnational crime across borders through information exchange among intelligence services, police forces

and prosecutors with committed South American partners including those combatting illicit trade trafficking and illicit financial flows.

Brazil's Amazon is also experiencing an explosion in crime and lawlessness including increased timber extraction, illegal gold extraction, and narco-transaction laundering. The Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV) have expanded their operations beyond São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to include alliances with '*Ndrangheta*, Italy's violent mafia syndicate.

In fact, illegal gold extraction is so profitable in the country that "sistemas" are also reaping great rewards. In addition to PCC and CV, criminal and armed narco-terrorist groups in all neighboring Amazonas states are cashing in on trade in illegal gold. In search of new riches, through porous borders and bribery, a confluence of illicit pathways is enabling the comingling and laundering of the profits from narcotics trafficking with those derived from illegal gold extraction.

Criminals and other bad actors use gold laundering to move illicit proceeds through a range of trade and customs fraud schemes, including fraudulent certificates of origin. Illegally-extracted gold can also be laundered through the use of processing plants working with intermediaries who produce fraudulent purchasing documents or through buying up stakes in gold mines and using the bank accounts of gold companies.

Illegally-extracted gold moves in all directions via numerous trafficking and smuggling routes, making it one of the most effective convergence instruments in the region.

This is the focus of our next Illicit Shadows, LLC investigation, *Illicit Gold: The Rush to Cash in on the Criminal Shadows of El Dorado*. The film, now in production, follows a single commodity from the Colombian goldfields and across the Amazon basin, from the riverbeds, where armed groups tax every crew that digs, to the refineries and consumer markets that absorb what they produce. No forensic test can establish where a bar of gold was mined, so unlike cocaine, which needs to be concealed at every stage, gold only needs to be laundered once, after which ever intermediary downstream can transact in good faith. That single technical fact explains why armed groups in Colombia now earn more from gold than from cocaine or other contraband, and why the PCC and Commando Vermelho have moved into territory and industries they never controlled before,

Like many other criminal networks, the PCC and CV are diversifying their illicit portfolios and penetrating legal industries. For example, in August 2025, Brazilian authorities launched Operação Carbono Oculto ("Hidden Carbon") investigating a multibillion-dollar PCC money laundering scheme involving the fuel sector. Related investigation and enforcement actions have targeted investment firms and fintech businesses. The case brought

to light how the PCC and CV have diversified into and embedded themselves in majors sectors (e.g., energy, logistics, construction and finance) of the Brazilian economy. Prosecutors cited that the PCC controlled over 1,000 gas stations generating BRL 52 billion; operated unlicensed fintech platforms (BRL 46 bn); and managed 40 investment funds (BRL 30bn including ethanol plants, a port terminal, and a nation-wide truck fleet).

Argentina and Uruguay are also seeing increased criminality in the past few years as their ports – via the Paraná-Paraguay waterway controlled by smuggling criminal networks – have been transit points for cocaine and other contraband to international markets, with both countries' borders being quite porous and law enforcement agencies under-resourced. In many cases, heightened anti-crime efforts ("the balloon effect") in other parts of the region have made Guyana and Suriname new illicit corridors for drugs and illicit goods in South America, where criminal networks have expanded trafficking and smuggling routes exploiting weak borders, remote airstrips, and the Amazon Basin's river networks. Numerous recent reports have also highlighted how a surge in cocaine trafficking in Europe is related to the accelerated presence of designated Latin narco-terrorist groups in Europe enabled by alliances with Eurasian mafias.

It is no surprise therefore that the Mexican cartels and other external criminal networks are heavily invested in diversifying into Colombia, Ecuador, and the Amazon and in expanding their illicit footprints across South America through joint ventures in drug trafficking and the illegally-extracted gold operations in the region. According to a July 2025 Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) report, Mexico's most powerful criminal organization has extended its tentacles into countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia to keep filling its coffers. The NGO estimates that from 2019 to the current year, the CJNG cartel's earnings from the trafficking of mercury alone — a substance considered one of the ten most lethal chemicals in the world, and one that is needed for illegal gold extraction activities — are helping to fuel an illicit gold rush worth at least $8 billion.

Surrounded by significant illicit markets and dangerous criminal networks, Colombia's national security continues to be weakened by the illicit activities of drug cartels, armed designated terrorist groups, money laundering networks, and other bad actors that converge within the country to destabilize its national economy and its governance institutions through criminality and corruption.

This surrounding threat environment makes Colombia both vulnerable and strategically indispensable. Its borders, ports, financial system, transportation corridors, and proximity to several major illicit economies place it at the intersection of regional criminal flows. But Colombia also possesses decades of institutional experience, intelligence capabilities,

international partnerships, and operational lessons that can make it a regional center of gravity for countering these networks.

The reality today in Colombia and the rest of the Americas is that TCOs and violent gangs are not only accelerating their narcotics empires but are systematically diversifying their illicit enterprises in the trafficking and smuggling of stolen cultural artifacts, gold and critical minerals, illegal tobacco and alcohol, weapons, humans, counterfeits, and other illicit goods and contraband.

The proliferation of criminal networks in the region along with the convergence of their cross-border illegal activities threatens our collective security, especially as many of these TCOs and illicit networks are well-armed and resourced. These groups possess at their disposal an arsenal of military-grade equipment, drones, armored tanks and submersibles, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), advanced technologies, and sophisticated encrypted-communications systems that enable anonymity and clandestine operations.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation Against Narco-Terrorism

In the current hemispheric security landscape, we have seen the determination of the United States, through both anti-crime and military campaigns, to fight narco-terrorism and the criminality of organized crime in an alliance with power elites in the region, witnessed most recently in the capture of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela.

In implementing the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), the United States has ramped up efforts across borders in the Americas to more robustly fight designated TCOs and threat networks, and is calling on committed partners to strengthen cross-border cooperation and coordination on trans-frontier security threats.

As with Venezuela, other countries are also being examined by the United States through a newer prism to counter organized crime and cross-border illicit trafficking crimes. Other hemispheric markets are being held to higher accountability and renewed attention is being given to fighting criminal-threat convergence that is presently harming all countries in the Western Hemisphere and corrupting their governance structures.

That is why President Espriella in recent months has reached out to the United States to find common ground to fight mutually-shared criminal threats. On de la Espriella's inauguration day, Washington pledged a $1 billion aid package to support security and counter-narcotics

operations. De la Espriella in taking office pledged to "relentlessly defeat narco-terrorism." He has also committed to host U.S. troops in Colombia to assist in joint operations in Amazonian jungles to destroy clandestine cocaine labs.

On September 8, 2026, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio met with President Espriella to re-set the U.S. – Colombia bilateral relationship. Rubio and de la Espriella signed memorandums of understanding focused on strategic-security cooperation, bilateral trade and economic cooperation, critical minerals and nuclear energy.

On counter-narcotics and anti-crime policy, Colombia and the United States jointly committed to eradicate cocaine and dismantle trafficking organizations such as those designated as terrorist organizations and narco-terrorists. They also agreed to enhance intelligence sharing and operations to stop the production and trafficking of cocaine by drug cartels as well as violent criminal structures such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the Clan del Golfo operating in the mountainous regions in Colombia, Venezuela, and across the Andes.

Colombia's opportunity is therefore larger than rebuilding bilateral counternarcotics cooperation with Washington. Bogotá can use the renewed partnership as a platform for regional leadership—connecting capable governments, law-enforcement agencies, intelligence services, prosecutors, customs authorities, and financial-intelligence units around common cross-border threats. Colombia's value lies not only in what assistance it receives, but in the operational experience and regional capabilities it can contribute.

Full Spectrum Dominance: From Intelligence Sharing to Network Disruption

So can Colombia build on this new strategic partnership with the United States, and provide greater regional leadership for the rest of Latin America, as other countries try to climb out of the criminal violence that is creating chaos and insecurity? How do governments build stronger resiliency and security frameworks across the Western Hemisphere?

As a former U.S. diplomat and national security official, I know first-hand the critical importance of Colombian leadership to help the United States turn the tide against illicit trafficking crimes in the region, including through Plan Colombia.

I warmly recall meeting Colombian National Police (CNP) General Óscar Naranjo at a US-Colombia conference on countering illicit pathways through transnational criminal investigative units (TCIUs) and public-private partnerships. TCIUs were established to identify, disrupt, dismantle, and prosecute the entire spectrum of criminality including drug-trafficking, narco-corruption, illicit trade, money laundering and terrorism. In a keynote in Cartagena in 2011, I applauded General Naranjo's distinguished record in combating transnational crime including the powerful Medellín and Cali Cartels, and drug lords such as Pablo Escobar.

The lesson is not to recreate Plan Colombia exactly as it existed, but to adapt its principles of sustained political commitment, intelligence-led operations, institutional capacity building, international partnership, and network disruption to a fundamentally different threat environment. Today's adversaries are more diversified, technologically capable, financially sophisticated, and transnational. The next generation of Colombian leadership must therefore target entire criminal ecosystems rather than individual cartels or commodities.

A practical way to do this is to organize regional cooperation around priority illicit-trade corridors and criminal ecosystems. Colombia and its partners should map where narcotics, illegally-extracted gold, illicit tobacco, weapons, human trafficking and smuggling, counterfeit goods, and illicit financial flows intersect across border crossings, ports, airports, logistics hubs, and financial centers. Such mapping can identify the nodes where coordinated intelligence, enforcement, financial investigation, and asset recovery can generate the greatest disruption across multiple illicit markets.

As Colombia elevates a new fight against illicit trafficking networks that are enabling a multi-billion-dollar illegal economy in the country and across the Americas, I trust that the new government will assess the impacts of organized crime and illicit trade to its national security through a focused prism of crime convergence and narco-terrorism. The reality is that the FARC, ELN, the Clan del Golfo and other Colombia transnational criminal groups are financing their infrastructure from proceeds derived from not only coca cultivation and cocaine production, but also from extortion, and the sale of illegal oil, gold, cigarettes and other contraband. They too have entered into alliances with the Mexican cartels, the PCC, and other transnational criminal groups.

Moreover, recognizing current dangers and converging crime trends is important to reconstituting security institutions and restoring peace in

criminalized spaces in a manner where state action is credible, transparent, accountable, and legitimate.

Leveraging instruments of national power and strategic partnerships can be decisive, especially by utilizing rapid information-sharing and actionable intelligence to target solutions against criminal networks and designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

On January 20, 2025, under Executive Order (E.O.) 14157, the U.S. designated a number of transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and transnational gangs as FTOs or Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), enabling strict financial and legal sanctions.

The United States has designated 21 criminal networks as FTOs that have engaged in a campaign of violence and terror throughout the Western Hemisphere that has destabilized countries with significant importance to U.S. national interests, and flooded the United States with deadly drugs, violent criminals, and vicious gangs. The first designated Mexican cartels as FTOs/SDGTs under E.O. 14157 were the Sinaloa Cartel, Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Cártel del Noreste (formerly Los Zetas), Gulf Cartel, La Nueva Familia Michoacana, and Carteles Unidos; Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Tren de Aragua (TdA) were also included.

On May 28, 2026, the United States also designated Comando Vermelho (CV) and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) as FTOs/SDGTs, effective June 5, 2026. Both criminal networks have orchestrated brutal attacks against Brazilian police officers, public officials, and civilians, and their influence extends far beyond Brazil's borders. Other designated groups include: Clan de Golfo (Colombia); Cartel de los Soles (Venezuela); Los Lobos, Los Choneros, The Chone Killers and Los Tiguerones (Ecuador); Viv Ansanm and Gran Grif gangs (Haiti); Barrio 18 (El Salvador); and Juárez Cartel and Los Viagras (Mexico).

The Embassy Intelligence Fusion Cell (EIFC) in Bogota is an excellent model that can be replicated to tackle the thriving illicit trade in South America and stop FTOs from moving drugs, illicit goods, and other contraband to the United States and regionally.

A regional intelligence fusion center can conduct intelligence overlays to pinpoint critical hubs, risk zones, and illicit trafficking routes across hemispheric supply chains and across source, transit / trans-shipment points and destination markets. Investments in frontier technologies and full-spectrum intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems can strengthen intelligence-sharing capabilities by providing critical, real-

time information on cocaine laboratories, production sites, trafficking routes, and departure points. These capabilities can help identify and target key leaders and operational nodes of designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), enabling Colombian and U.S. security forces to conduct coordinated, joint operations to disrupt and dismantle criminal networks.

Such a mechanism should not become another information repository. Its value should be measured by operational outcomes: actionable intelligence exchanged, priority networks identified, joint or parallel investigations initiated, financial accounts and beneficial owners identified, assets frozen or seized, illicit logistics disrupted, and high-value facilitators prosecuted.

Colombia could complement this capability by establishing designated operational points of contact with participating governments so that intelligence concerning a priority network or corridor can move rapidly among police, customs, prosecutors, financial-intelligence units, and other competent authorities.

Action beats reaction every time.

At the strategic policy level, the United States should constructively engage other leaders in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, for example, to do more. To get determined leaders in the region to take more robust actions such as Colombia has done to prosecute narco-terrorists, criminals, counterfeiters, corrupt influencers, money launderers, and terrorist financiers that are currently thriving unmitigated, undermining a strong framework for mutual benefit in bilateral trade, investment, market integrity and security.

The EIFC should also leverage U.S. Homeland Security Task Forces (HSTFs) and the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center (IPR Center) to provide technical assistance, intelligence-sharing, and capacities to target leadership nodes, disrupt the operational infrastructure and illicit finances of nefarious criminal trafficking and smuggling networks, other threats networks, and their facilitators and enablers operating across the Americas. Other U.S. investigative and intelligence support from Joint Interagency Task Force-South, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of War's U.S. Southern Command, and the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FINCEN) will also help those in the region to cement regional, deterrence-focused anti-crime partnerships.

A recent Latinobarometro survey found perceptions of China's global influence in Latin America increasing relative to the United States, underscoring the importance of examining the security implications of China's expanding economic footprint in the region. Deepening commercial relations with China should not come at the expense of transparency, market integrity, or national-security safeguards. Of particular concern are vulnerabilities involving Chinese money-laundering networks, counterfeit supply chains, trade-based money laundering, opaque corporate structures, and the criminal exploitation of legitimate trade and infrastructure. Given the regional expansion of China's influence including through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and as the 2025 National Security Strategy underscores, the United States makes clear that it will reject outside dominance and will no longer cede access to influence in the Western Hemisphere through the modern "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine.

Of equal growing concern are Chinese investments, ownership, or operational control of critical infrastructure, key ports, and port facilities across the Americas. Through more robust diplomatic action, Secretary Rubio was able to encourage Panama to reduce China's dominance and influence in two key ports in the Panama Canal, and strengthen U.S.-Panama security cooperation.

Furthermore, based on the scale of money laundering by Chinese Money Laundering Networks (CMLNs), the United States, Colombia, and other Latin governments should actively pursue more joint investigations and cross-border cases against Chinese triads as enablers that provide material support to designated narco-terrorists, and thereby surface their illicit wealth. Homeland Security Investigation's Trade Transparency Units (TTUs) can be leveraged in these instances especially related to trade-based money laundering (TBML) to combat tariff and fraudulent duty evasion, trade fraud, illegal transshipment, and the mislabeling or violations of the Rule of Origin and document fraud in Free Trade Zones (FTZs). These vulnerabilities reinforce the need for stronger beneficial-ownership transparency, customs controls, anti-money-laundering safeguards, and coordinated financial investigations across the region.

No country can dismantle transnational criminal networks acting alone.

Colombia should therefore help build a coalition of committed governments willing to move beyond declarations toward sustained operational cooperation. The Shield of the Americas provides a potential political framework for such cooperation, but its effectiveness will depend

on translating political commitment into intelligence sharing, coordinated investigations, aligned sanctions, financial disruption and asset recovery, border and port cooperation, and joint operations against priority networks and trafficking corridors. Such cooperation can help make the Western Hemisphere safer and more resilient against the mutually shared threats posed by drug cartels, TCOs, and other transnational threat networks

CONCLUSION

For decades, Colombia has been one of the most important and steadfast U.S. allies in Latin America, serving as a trusted and strategic partner in counternarcotics, regional security, counterterrorism, and democracy. During this period, the U.S.-Colombia security relationship generally has received broad bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress.

President de la Espriella has an opportunity to address Colombia's economic and security challenges by dismantling the ecosystem of criminality and corruption fueled by illicit trade. This includes empowering his law enforcement through strategic anti-crime investments and advanced technologies capable of countering the cartels and armed criminal adversaries, such as the armed ELN. Rebuilding police capacity, closing the coordination gap between national and local authorities, and treating prevention as a core strategy rather than an afterthought are equally important.

Colombia therefore must pursue three mutually reinforcing objectives.

First, it should treat the convergence of organized crime, illicit trade, designated terrorist organizations, corruption, and illicit finance as an integrated national-security challenge rather than a collection of separate crimes.

Second, drawing on the lessons of its earlier fight against powerful cartels, Colombia should again provide regional leadership through stronger institutions, intelligence-led enforcement, financial investigations, and coordinated cross-border operations.

Third, Bogotá should help build a coalition of committed governments capable of translating regional political cooperation, including through initiatives such as the Shield of the Americas, into sustained operational action against the networks, facilitators, financial flows, and infrastructure that sustain illicit economies.

Success will also require governmental and market stakeholders across the region to adopt whole-of-society approaches supported by effective cross-border cooperation and information-sharing mechanisms.

Better, and seamless, coordination across sectors can strengthen the disruption of converging security threats, illicit trade, threat finance, and money laundering

The strategic objective should not simply be to seize more drugs, illicitly-extracted gold, counterfeit goods, or contraband. It should be to make transnational criminal networks less powerful by systematically depriving them of the wealth, infrastructure, logistics, corrupt protection, and safe havens that sustain their operations. Colombia has confronted powerful criminal organizations before. The challenge now is to apply that hard-earned experience to a more interconnected threat environment, and once again help lead the region in confronting it

With Colombia's hemispheric leadership, we can ensure safer communities and greater success in today's battle against criminal networks and narco-terrorist groups.

David M. Luna is the Executive Director of the International Coalition Against Illicit Economies (ICAIE) and a former U.S. diplomat and national security official charged with strengthening international cooperation and public-private partnerships on fighting crime convergence threats including the inter-connected links between drug cartels, transnational criminal organizations, illicit trade networks, terrorist groups and related corruption and money laundering. Mr. Luna is also the Co-Founder of the Illicit Shadows investigative docuseries illuminating the dark forces shaping the global criminal underworld, which recently launched the new online Museum of Illicit Shadows (MIS).