

Military and Security Aid

The United States provides military aid to nations whose policies the United States wants to support or influence. Over the years, military and security aid has been the most controversial type of aid that the United States has provided. Even with the end of the Cold War, the provision of military aid still sparks great debate.

Why does the United States provide military and security aid?

The United States provides military and security aid to nations around the world to further its own security interests. Egypt, Israel, and Taiwan are among the largest recipients of U.S. military aid.

Over the years the United States has also provided a great deal of military and security aid to its neighbors to the south: the nations of Latin America. In fact, the United States first undertook a militarily-focused foreign aid program in Cuba after the United States gained control of the island following the Spanish-American War of 1898.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, U.S. assistance efforts went hand-in-hand with the expanding role of the U.S. military and business. The United States repeatedly intervened in the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico. In several countries, especially Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua, U.S. troops maintained almost a constant presence into the 1930s. At the same time, the United States built roads, hospitals, harbors, and railroads, usually to support U.S. investments. Policy makers also viewed the region as a test case for the United States' ability to transplant democratic values and reduce poverty.

U.S. involvement in Latin America has often sparked controversy. During the Cold War, U.S. policy makers were torn between containing the spread of communism and working on improving the lives of the poor and promoting democracy and human rights. Often Cold War strategy won out: the United States provided

military and diplomatic backing to brutal military dictators in the name of fighting communism.

How has U.S. policy in Latin America changed in recent decades?

A debt crisis in the 1980s prompted a review of U.S. priorities in Latin America. Most Latin American nations were heavily indebted, with Brazil and Mexico heading the list. Country after country in the region adopted economic reform programs crafted by the IMF. These belt-tightening measures hit the poor the hardest, and the impact soon spilled across U.S. borders. The number of illegal immigrants crossing into the United States soared during the 1980s.

The end of the Cold War and an economic upswing have changed perceptions on both sides of the cultural divide that separates the United States from its southern neighbors. U.S. officials now view Latin American nations as trading partners rather than as allies in the struggle against communism. Dictatorships have given way to democratic governments. Peace has come to many countries scarred by civil war.

The trends in Latin America are not all positive. Despite impressive economic growth in recent years, countries have made little progress in reducing the region's widespread poverty. The gap between the rich and the poor in many Latin America countries remains wider than in any other part of the world and has widened during recent years. Moreover, democracy in the region has yet to sink deep roots. In some Latin American nations, powerful militaries continue to operate outside of the law. While U.S. economic assistance is given to improve conditions for the poor, the programs have been overshadowed by U.S. efforts to stop the flow of illegal drugs from the region.

Case Study: Plan Colombia

Ninety percent of the cocaine and most of the heroin entering the United States comes from Colombia. On July 13, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a bill promising \$1.3 billion in aid to Colombia to help the Latin American nation fight its war on drugs. Today, ten years later, more than \$6 billion has been given to the country. The aid, known as Plan Colombia, continues to support several different efforts to curb Colombia's illegal narcotics industry—the largest in the world. But many have criticized the program, designed to slow the flow of cocaine and heroin into the United States from Colombia, as ineffective and misguided.

What is the purpose of Plan Colombia?

Through Plan Colombia, the United States hopes to address its own drug problem by reducing the drug supply at its source. The Colombian government is a full partner with the United States in this program. The U.S. aid package contributes to a larger Colombian government program to strengthen democracy and create peace in the country.

For most of its history, violent conflict has plagued Colombia as various revolutionary groups have tried (sometimes successfully) to overthrow the government. Particularly since the 1980s, these guerilla forces fighting against the government have become more and more involved in drug cultivation and trafficking. They impose taxes on those who grow the drugs, using the money to finance their armed resistance. The Colombian government hopes that by reducing the trade in illegal drugs, it can weaken the guerillas, advance the peace process, and strengthen democracy. By early 2010, there was evidence that violence in the country had decreased significantly.

How are U.S. resources used in Plan Colombia?

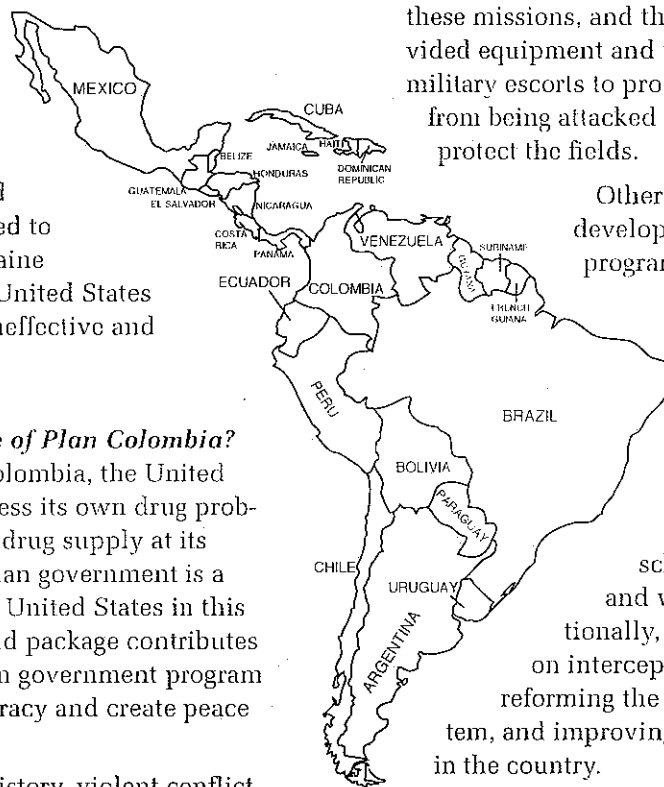
The U.S. role in Plan Colombia has several dimensions. Most of the resources are dedicated to helping the Colombian army and police force reduce the cultivation of coca and opium poppies, which are used to produce cocaine and heroin. One method involves crop-duster planes spraying fields of coca and poppies with an herbicide to kill the plants. Some U.S. personnel and equipment have been used on these missions, and the U.S. military has provided equipment and training for Colombian military escorts to protect the crop-dusters from being attacked by the guerillas who protect the fields.

Other U.S. money goes to development programs. These programs offer help to peasant farmers, encouraging them to grow legal food and cash crops in place of coca. U.S. funds also support improving and expanding basic infrastructure such as schools, clinics, roads, and water systems. Additionally, Plan Colombia focuses on intercepting drug shipments, reforming the Colombian judicial system, and improving human rights practices in the country.

The U.S. contribution to Plan Colombia has provoked a strong reaction in the United States, Colombia, and abroad. These reactions help to clarify some of the beliefs and values that underlie the U.S. decision to extend foreign aid to Colombia.

What are the controversies surrounding Plan Colombia?

Some object to U.S. involvement in Colombia altogether. For example, some in the United States feel that U.S. military involvement has the potential to escalate, requiring more troops. Many Colombians believe that the United States should deal with the drug



problem within its own borders instead of interfering in Colombia.

Others question the nature of U.S. aid. The aerial spraying of coca fields has raised objections on several fronts. While the U.S. government claims that the herbicide used does not contaminate water or soil or cause illness in humans or animals, many Colombians have reported illness after fields around their homes were sprayed. Also, many small farmers grow coca plants among legitimate crops and aerial spraying typically kills entire fields, leaving peasants with little food or means of making a living.

Perhaps the biggest controversies surround the goals and priorities of the U.S. component of Plan Colombia. Some argue that U.S. anti-drug efforts in Colombia will help address the drug problem in the United States, so funding Plan Colombia is clearly in U.S. interests. The U.S. government also claims that promoting better human rights practices and assisting in economic development in Colombia are important goals. Nonetheless, critics note that groups affiliated with the Colombian military have been accused of widespread violations of human rights, including torture and murder, while in pursuit of suspected guerrillas.

How has the United States responded to these concerns?

The U.S. State Department acknowledges that fighting the drug war in Colombia cannot be successful without addressing the other



A Colombian farmer and his son next to a coffee plant. U.S. funds are used to encourage farmers to plant legal crops instead of coca.

Katie Atkinson, USAID

problems that plague the country, such as civil war, corruption, and poverty. And because the rebel groups in Colombia rely so heavily on the drug industry, helping the Colombian government fight against drugs also helps it fight against the rebel groups. Critics believe that Plan Colombia is aimed more at stabilizing the Colombian government rather than decreasing coca production. Some critics say that the United States should not be involved in another country's civil war.

Deciding whether and how the United States should be involved with Plan Colombia clearly depends on the values and goals behind U.S. foreign policy. Should the United States focus its resources on stopping drug abuse at home rather than destroying coca plants in another country? Is there a point where U.S. involvement in Plan Colombia becomes direct involvement in Colombia's civil war?