An Interview with Adam Isacson

Juan Misle Dona

Adam Isacson leads the Defense Oversight Program for the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). He analyzes U.S. military assistance to Latin America, drug and security policy in the Americas, and peace processes, with a special focus on U.S. defense cooperation in Colombia and Mexico.

In this conversation, we discussed the emergent security paradigms in the Americas: a wave of violence against social leaders in Colombia as it struggles to implement a controversial peace process with demobilized FARC rebels; hostilities between Colombia and Venezuela and the possibility of inter-state violence; potential for drug and security reforms in Mexico; and U.S. involvement in the region. This interview was held in November 2018.

This year’s presidential election marked the largest share of votes in recent history for the left in Colombia. How would you assess the current balance of political forces there?

There is certainly a lot more political space for people on the left and center-left than at any other time in recent memory. Somebody with Gustavo Petro’s (the left-wing 2018 presidential candidate) views would have been dodging bullets in the early 1990s. He and his supporters would not have held mass rallies or gained enthusiastic support throughout the country. Even a center-left candidate like Sergio Fajardo and his vice-presidential candidate Claudia López — an anti-corruption crusader — would have been excluded from any meaningful participation.

Nevertheless, Colombia is still a fundamentally conservative country and the mainstream in Colombia is more conservative than it was twenty years ago. This can be partly explained by the presidency of Álvaro Uribe, a far-right leader who improved security within Colombia. That being said, there is not a hegemony of the right anymore, and it is possible to have different viewpoints.

Tell us about the rise in killings of social leaders in Colombia. We saw a similar trend in the 1980s after the Colombian state failed to fully demobilize and protect disarmed FARC guerrillas. What can be done to prevent a repeat of another violent relapse?
According to the Defensoría’s figures, from early 2016 until early September this year, there have been 350 killings of people identified as social leaders. As part of the peace process, the Colombian government convinced the FARC to pull out of vast areas of the country. From the time the ceasefire was signed in August 2016 until well after August 2017, when they finished turning in their weapons, vast areas of the country became free — for a moment — of armed groups. I traveled to many of these areas and regions that were previously off-limits were now accessible: Putumayo, Caqueta – towns that had clearly been rebel towns. The big mystery is why the Colombian government did not fill the power vacuum that was created, even in areas with swathes of minerals, oil, and other natural resources.

Throughout Colombia, there is a system of tens of thousands of community action boards — juntas de acción comunal. They resemble advisory bodies and are controlled by a wide variety of agents including school teachers, union leaders, indigenous, and afro-colombian landholding leaders. During this period, these leaders expressed how “suddenly we were able to make our own decisions for ourselves. We were truly independent.” Unfortunately this did not last long. Many people with weapons and who are traditional powers from nearby regions want to control the territories where there is a power vacuum.

Who is behind the killings? In some areas, the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas or dissident members of the FARC are now moving back. Frequently, narco-traffickers, many of whom are heirs of the old United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitaries, are now running these smaller regional paramilitary groups.

There is a close relationship between organized crime, mayors, governors, and people in the mining or large landholding sectors — people who want independent leaders out of the way. People participating in coca substitution projects and those who happen to be forming leftist movements are roadblocks. The goal quite often right now seems to be to threaten everybody and prevent genuine political participation.

Unfortunately, in the short-term, the Colombian government is simply unable to protect every junta de acción comunal leader. We’re talking about tens of thousands of potential targets around the country in some of the most remote areas around the country. You can’t protect them all.

The justice system must do more. A killing will not be ordered if there is a serious probability that the perpetrator will be investigated, tried, and thrown in jail. More support for collective protection measures is necessary as well.
A lot of indigenous and afro-colombian communities have put together their own armed guards. There are more efforts to gather entire communities under the umbrella of early-warning systems so that there is more rapid response from the state. Certainly just a cellphone and a bulletproof vest is not enough anymore.

The July Mexican 2018 election propelled nationalist Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency, in contrast to regional trends towards right-wing rule. He has promised a wide set of reformist security policies aimed at re-thinking the drug war, including a controversial proposal to grant amnesty to drug traffickers. How does this approach compare with the Colombian government’s strategy of revamping the drug war and rolling back the 2016 peace agreements that created similar provisions for FARC insurgents?

Neither government has tried amnesty for small-scale drug traffickers before. López Obrador’s proposal has gotten a lot of pushback from victims. The more senior the drug trafficker that you plan to include in any amnesty, the angrier victims get because they were not getting any justice from the justice system from the beginning. There is no guarantee that those granted amnesty won’t revert back to criminality.

In Colombia, the Santos government was in more advanced stages of talks with the Urabeños and Gulf Clan neo-paramilitary groups on reduced sentences. Again victims argued that there was no guarantee that there will not be recidivism again in a couple of years. Many of these people were demobilized as Popular Liberation Army (EPL) in the 1990s and then joined the paramilitaries.

This question also relates to a different approach to counter-narcotics. There are Latin American leaders who have taken tentative steps toward a different drug policy — reducing penalties for possession, reducing the incarceration rate, taking a softer line towards families that cultivate drug crops. However, these leaders are running against the popular opinion in their countries. These countries are very conservative when it comes to social issues. Nobody is talking about legalization, even of marijuana, in just about any Latin American country. Leaders have done it, but they have done so against public opinion. In Uruguay, marijuana legalization is also unpopular in the polls. Their leaders have legalized it contrary to public opinion. In Colombia, Duque has taken steps like re-criminalizing the possessions of small amounts of marijuana, which is still a popular policy.
So I think there are limits to what López Obrador can get accomplished in Mexico, even without considering the pushback such a policy would get from the United States.

**What conditions can be set for armed actors to abandon illicit activities and transition to civilian life? Should transitional justice be applied at the regional level in a time of globalized cross-border violence?**

I don’t know if you can apply transitional justice to those cases. You can certainly apply the equivalent of plea-bargaining in the United States, where you give somebody a lighter sentence in exchange for revealing everything about their network. There are some things that could be amnestied as long as there is a serious program to monitor criminals and give them the training and opportunities they otherwise wouldn’t have. I don’t see that being done anywhere.

Ultimately, this kind of crime thrives because of its relationship with government. You can’t have this level of organized crime without a green light from corrupt officials, particularly at the local level, around the country. Negotiating with them would only work if it involved revealing every corrupt official who had helped the network, and not granting amnesty to those officials. I see no proposals to do that right now.

**Colombian authorities have detected the presence of Mexican cartels in their territory, who are working in an alliance with local drug gangs and creating regional cleavages in drug and security policy. How do you foresee U.S. officials responding to the effects of changing Colombian and Mexican drug reforms? Could these differences in strategies affect the coherence of U.S. policy responses?**

These groups are primarily concerned with maintaining their supply chain. The paramilitaries demobilized ten years ago, key leaders of the Urabéños were lost, and then of course, the FARC demobilized. It messed up their steady supply. In some areas that I have been to recently, especially on the Pacific coast Mexican buyers may even be maintaining peace between all these small bands and gangs by providing leadership and security to the criminal groups, establishing who gets control of each territory. However, some analysts believe this connection is overblown – that buyers do not have that kind of power. Some also say that the same role is being played by corrupt members of the security forces.
The United States should pay more attention to financial flows – where money was going out, where money was coming in, and how it was going back to Mexico. A kilo of cocaine in Colombia costs about $5,000. You split that up in the United States and it is over $100,000. All that money in-between goes to the Mexican groups who are buying cocaine from Colombia and then transporting it up. Yet we spend so many resources to eradicate campesinos’ coca fields and trying to stop drug supply through the rivers in Colombia before it even gets to Mexican hands.

The collapse of neighboring Venezuela threatens efforts for coordinated security responses in the region. At the same time, growing presence of the ELN and alleged FARC leadership in the country may put Venezuela on the brink of interstate violence with Colombia. Is there a way to mitigate an escalation of conflict between the two countries?

That is a big worry of mine. An incident could happen on the border, possibly involving organized crime, in which members of Venezuela’s Guardia Nacional kill Colombian military or police personnel. It could easily escalate into the first inter-state war in South America since the 1930s.

Given the lack of de-escalation mechanisms, trusted and impartial mediators are crucial. While the OAS (Organization of American States) is designed to mediate such disputes, Venezuela is pulling out of the institution. There is no international peace enforcement capability. Unfortunately, we don’t have an administration in the United States that might be inclined to uphold or take the side of cooler heads.

You’ve been researching and tracking U.S. military assistance and aid to Latin America for years. What are the United States’ current strategic security goals in Latin America? How have changing regional dynamics altered U.S.-Latin American relations?

U.S. grants and security assistance to the region is at a historic low. Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative are over, and nothing has replaced them. Security aid to Central America has increased, but it focuses on non-lethal assistance. So the missions that are guiding U.S. assistance to the region and U.S. security concerns in the region are always counter-narcotics.

For this administration, while it is clear that migrant flows are viewed as a security threat, it is not clear to what extent the military agrees with that
prioritization. Transnational organized crime is the primary concern they have right now, but the U.S. government doesn't always view it as we do: as a byproduct of corruption and weak rule of law. They often see it as a list of enemies to take out.

Not all of these have a clear military response. Obviously, if you're going to interdict drugs, you deploy more boats and helicopters and things like that to do so. But a lot of other things are more dependent on intelligence and planning, and require much more diplomacy than we’re putting in. We are in a phase of strategic incoherence with regard to Latin America.