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## The Importance of the Peace Process for Colombia's International Position

Bartłomiej Znojek

*The peace process with the largest guerrilla groups in Colombia is one of the main challenges in its domestic politics. It also has become an important tool to strengthen the country's international status and ties with foreign partners, which support the process. In this group, the UN plays a prominent role through verification of the peace talks and the results. Since it is a regular issue on the UN Security Council (UNSC) agenda, it provides Poland, a non-permanent member, the opportunity to enhance the Polish-Colombian political dialogue and makes it more attractive as a European partner for Latin American countries.*

December 2017 marked a year since the peace accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest guerrilla group in the country, entered into force. The deal, which came during the term of Juan Manuel Santos, president since 2010, included demobilisation and disarmament of the group, as well as its conversion into a political party. As a result, on 1 September 2017, the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force was founded (which allowed the former fighters to keep the FARC acronym). The peace accord also covered special criminal justice rules for FARC members, their re-integration into society, and compensation for victims of the conflict, as well as rural-area reform (e.g., incentives for territories affected by the conflict). The Colombian authorities also managed to enact a legal restriction on any modification to the deal with FARC for 12 years.

In February 2017, the Santos government started official negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN), the second-largest Colombian guerrilla band. Both parties agreed a ceasefire from 1 October 2017 to 9 January 2018 to facilitate the talks. However, they failed to agree to an extension of the ceasefire, and once it expired, ELN carried out several armed attacks, including on petroleum installations. The progress of the peace process will depend on the results of the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections—the first since the 2016 deal with FARC—and the ability of the next government to keep attracting support from international partners.

**Political Situation.** The main political dividing line in Colombia is over the terms of the deal with FARC. The opposition's main criticism is that the incumbent government virtually sanctioned the impunity of the former guerrillas. They also point to an increase in illicit drug cultivation, which has been an important source of income for groups like the FARC. If the peace accord's opponents win the upcoming elections, that may complicate implementation of the accord and progress in the talks with ELN. The elections will serve as an important test of Colombians' support for the peace process.

In the March's parliamentary elections, the FARC representatives are guaranteed five seats in both the country's House of Representatives and Senate for the next two terms. Opinion surveys indicate the opposition Democratic Centre (CD), led by Senator Álvaro Uribe, who was Colombia's president in 2002-2010 (Santos was defence minister in 2006-2009), could win the elections. Uribe is one of the main critics of the FARC accord.

The presidential elections will take place on 27 May (if no candidate has obtained an absolute majority, the second round will be held on 17 June). The Colombian constitution forbids a third consecutive term, so neither Santos nor Uribe can run. It is too early to indicate a likely winner from among the more than a dozen registered contenders. There are ongoing inter-party talks on choosing common candidates.

**Economic Situation.** In 2016, Colombia's National Planning Department estimated that success of the peace process may translate into 1.1-1.9 additional percentage points in annual GDP growth. Despite the armed conflict, Colombia has been one of the most stable Latin American economies, and it has enjoyed mostly continuous GDP growth in the last two decades. The oil trade, though, is a significant part of the country's income, which makes it vulnerable to world commodity price changes. Lower prices partly explain the GDP growth slowdown in the last three years, from 3.1% in 2015 to 1.7% in 2017. In the next two years, growth is estimated to increase to 3% annually.

In economic forecasts for Colombia, the IMF and OECD mention the peace process as a factor that may attract additional investment, especially in projects in areas affected by the conflict. In 2016, Colombia accounted for 9% of Latin America's FDI stock (\$164 billion) and 10% of FDI inflow (\$13.6 billion).

**International Context.** Changes to Colombia's foreign policy after Santos' assumed the presidency preceded the official start of talks with FARC in 2012. The changes referred especially to relations with the U.S. Colombia has been a key U.S. ally in South America, maintaining close cooperation in defence and counter-narcotics operations, among others. FARC's deterioration because of military actions in the final years of Uribe's tenure and the beginning of Santos' first term paved the way for the peace accord. Santos' government, however, also aimed at reducing Colombia's dependence on U.S. support and improving relations with its neighbours, mainly Venezuela and Ecuador. Colombia's relations with these countries had become especially tense after the Colombian army launched an attack on a FARC base on Ecuadorian territory in 2008. Afterwards, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez was instrumental in convincing FARC to start talks with Santos' government. Ecuador has since hosted negotiation rounds with ELN.

Colombia's international activity has soared during the peace process with FARC. This has translated mostly into closer government cooperation with international partners involved in the negotiations, including guarantors (Cuba and Norway), accompanying countries (Chile and Venezuela), and special envoys (the U.S., EU and UN). At the same time the Santos government has strived to broaden the group of international supporters of the peace talks and future deal.

From the Colombian authorities' standpoint, the UN has played the preeminent role in legitimising the peace process. The UN's verification missions looked after the implementation of the deal with FARC (e.g., demobilisation and disarmament). The current mission—established in September 2017—has been monitoring further stages of the deal and the ceasefire with ELN. The peace process has been a regular topic on the UNSC agenda because it receives progress reports from the UN Secretary General every 90 days.

The EU also remains an important partner of Colombia's. The bloc has more than 15 years of financial support for a project aimed at tackling problems behind the conflict. The EU Trust Fund for Colombia is one of the main initiatives dedicated to support the peace accord's implementation. Inaugurated in December 2016, the fund's €95 million budget consists of contributions from 19 EU Member States, although Poland is not one of them, and is aimed at supporting rural development projects.

**Conclusion.** The completion of Colombia's peace process remains in the long-term perspective. No matter the results of this year's elections, the victors will be limited in their ability to change the terms of the deal with FARC and must consider the expectations of the international community—especially the UN and Colombia's neighbours—that the country will continue toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Santos government's achievements in consolidating support for the process helped internationalise the issue and attach priority status to it at the UN among the other Latin America topics. In the long term, this will allow Colombia to continue to use the peace process to enhance its own international position.

With its internal transformation and increasing international engagement, Colombia has become an attractive Latin American partner for Poland. Both countries similarly prioritize cooperation with the U.S. and Colombia is the only Latin American state to be a NATO Global Partner. Poland's non-permanent membership of the UNSC and the peace process' place on the council's agenda may favour closer Polish-Colombian cooperation. Support for the changes in Colombia may enhance Poland's attractiveness in Europe for Latin American countries in general. In this context, it is worthwhile to consider additional actions, such as participation in the EU Trust Fund for Colombia. An important stimulus for stronger bilateral relations would be to invite Colombia's next president to visit Poland on the first trip to Europe.