

**Testimony of Luis Mendez
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Before the
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
U.S.-Colombia Bilateral Relationship & Regional Security
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Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

President Trump has returned the Western Hemisphere to the center of American foreign policy and restored America's leadership role. That means close cooperation with regional partners to combat drug trafficking terrorist organizations, end illegal immigration, dismantle criminal networks, and uphold democratic governance. Our goal is a hemisphere of governments committed to making the region safer, stronger, and more prosperous. Colombia is central to that vision.

Over the past four years, our partnership with Colombia was tested by significant policy differences that weakened cooperation on issues central to U.S. national interests. The Petro administration's failed policies allowed continued violence, armed group fragmentation, and record coca cultivation and cocaine production. Assistant Secretary Weiland addressed this crisis in detail.

The deterioration of Colombia's counternarcotics performance under President Petro was the direct result of his policy choices. These choices undermined security cooperation, emboldened narcoterrorist organizations, and weakened Colombia's institutions. The United States responded accordingly. In September 2025, President Trump determined Colombia had "failed demonstrably" to make sufficient efforts to meet its international counternarcotics obligations, and Secretary Rubio followed with a non-certification decision and targeted sanctions. Despite this, we did not turn our back on the Colombian people, but we did make clear that partnership requires performance. Our relationships with Colombia's security forces, justice sector, and local officials remained strong throughout, and we continued support for programming that serves U.S. national interests.

Colombia's cooperation on immigration enforcement has been inconsistent. Transits across the Darien region have dropped sharply under the Trump Administration's leadership, and Colombia has participated in the CBP Home program encouraging voluntary returns. However, the Petro administration has refused to accept ICE deportation flights for most Colombians unlawfully present in the United States, and Colombian Air Force repatriation flights have not kept pace with the rate of detentions.

The inauguration of President-elect Abelardo de la Espriella on August 7 presents a strategic opportunity, and the Department is committed to ensuring the United States is an engaged partner from the outset of his administration. President-elect de la Espriella has expressed a clear desire to realign Colombia with the United States, join the Shield of the Americas, participate in the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition, renew forced eradication of coca, combat illegal immigration flows, and exit China's Belt and Road Initiative. We applaud these commitments and will look to deepen cooperation in ways that deliver concrete results for the American people. That means holding the new government to measurable benchmarks on eradication, extradition, and security cooperation.

The incoming government will face challenges. Membership in foreign terrorist organizations has doubled over five years. These groups, operating near Colombia's borders and across vast ungoverned spaces, are destabilizing Ecuador and Venezuela; they also are diversifying into illegal gold mining and other illicit economies to fund their operations. Colombia's finances are strained, its military is undersized, and urgent domestic pressures will compete for the new government's attention and resources. President-elect de la Espriella will need a strong U.S. partner, and we intend to be one.

That partnership must extend well beyond security cooperation. China has expanded its footprint in Colombia, posing strategic risks to critical infrastructure, supply chains, and digital systems. We must compete effectively, and we can. Colombia offers significant potential for U.S. trade, investment, energy cooperation, and critical minerals development. These are areas where American companies and the U.S. government can offer something China cannot: transparent, rules-based partnerships that strengthen Colombian sovereignty rather than erode it. Under Secretary Rubio's direction, and in coordination with the Executive Office of the President and the interagency, we are developing a comprehensive engagement strategy that advances U.S. economic and security interests together, not in isolation.

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The United States will not return to a model of open-ended foreign assistance with no accountability for results. But where our interests align and where partners are willing to share the burden, targeted assistance strengthens our relationships and advances our goals. Colombia, under the right leadership, is exactly that kind of partner.

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, members of the committee, the election of Abelardo de la Espriella is an opportunity we should not squander. Working with this subcommittee, we can deepen the U.S.-Colombia partnership in ways that deliver for the American people and advance stability across the region. I look forward to your questions.

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