Colombia, largest cocaine supplier to U.S., considers decriminalizing

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Coca growers block soldiers ordered to destroy the crop in Caño Indio, Colombia, on May 11. (Schneyder Menoza/AFP/Getty Images)

BOGOTÁ, Colombia — It's the largest producer of cocaine in the world, the source of more than 90 percent of the drug seized in the United States. It's home to the largest Drug Enforcement Administration office overseas. And for decades, it's been a key partner in Washington'snever-ending "war on drugs."

Now, Colombia is calling for an end to that war. It wants instead to lead a global experiment: decriminalizing cocaine.

Two weeks after taking office,the country's first leftist government is proposing an end to "prohibition" and the start of a government-regulated cocaine market. Through legislation and alliances with other leftist governments in the region, officials in this South American nation

hope to turn their country into a laboratory for drug decriminalization.

“It is time for a new international convention that accepts that the war on drugs has failed,” President Gustavo Petro said in his inaugural address this month.

It’sa radical turn in this historically conservative country, one that could upend its long-standing — and lucrative — counternarcotics relationship with the United States. U.S. officials past and present are signaling concern; thedrug was responsible for an estimated 25,000 overdose deaths in the United States last year.

“The United States and the Biden administration is not a supporter of decriminalization,”said Jonathan Finer, the White House deputy national security adviser, who met with Petro here before his inauguration.

Aformer DEA official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because his currentemployer had not authorized him to speak on the matter, said he feared the move would limit the agency’s ability to collaborate with the Colombians on drug trafficking investigations.

“It would incrementally kill the cooperation,” he said. “It would be devastating, not just regionally, but globally. Everyone would be fighting from the outside in.”

Billions of U.S. dollars have funded a strategy focused largely on destroying the cocaine trade at its point of origin: the fields of rural Colombia. U.S. training and intelligence have propelled Colombia’s decades-long military efforts to eradicate coca, the base plant for cocaine, and dismantle drug trafficking groups. And yet more than a half century after PresidentRichard M. Nixon declared drugs “America’s public enemy number one,” the Colombian trade has reachedrecord levels. Coca cultivation has tripled in the last decade, according to U.S. figures.

Felipe Tascón, Petro’s drug czar, said the Colombians aim to take advantage of a rare moment in which many key governments in the region — including the cocaine-producing countries Colombia, Peru and Bolivia — are led by leftists.

In his first interview since being named to the job, the economist said he wants to meet with his counterparts in those countries to discussdecriminalization at the regional level. Eventually, he hopes a unified regional bloc can renegotiate international drug conventions at the United Nations.

The coronavirus has gutted the price of coca. It could reshape the cocaine trade.

Domestically, Petro’s administration is planning to back legislation to decriminalize cocaine and marijuana. It plans to put an end to aerial spraying and the manual eradication of coca, which critics say unfairly targets poor rural farmers. By regulating the sale of cocaine, Tascón argued, the government would wrest the market from armed groups and cartels.

“Drug traffickers know that their business depends on it being prohibited,” Tascón said. “If you regulate it like a public market … the high profits disappear and the drug trafficking disappears.”

Tascón said the administration will continue operations by air, sea and river to target major drug trafficking links. But authorities will also focus on providing rural farmers with crop alternatives to coca.

He aims to reframe his job not as “counternarcotics” or “anti-drug” but rather “drug policy.”

“The government’s program doesn’t talk about the problem of drugs,” he said. “It talks about the problems generated by the prohibition of drugs.”

Tascón has spoken about his plans with his counterparts in Peru. Ricardo Soberón, head of the Peruvian anti-drug agency DEVIDA, said it was too early to say whether Lima would support decriminalization, but he would welcome a regional debate about new approaches. Petro could find an ally in Bolivia, where in the 2000s the government of Evo Morales began allowing farmers to legally grow coca in limited quantities.

As the most important U.S. ally against cocaine,Colombia is an unlikely pioneer in decriminalizing it. But it’s also the country that has suffered the most from the war on drugs. Tascón said it’s the country where the need for a new strategy is perhaps the most urgent.

Thepoint was driven home by Colombia’s truth commission. The panel, appointed as part of the country’s 2016 peace accord between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, recommended in June that the government move toward “strict legal regulation of drugs.”

In a report, the commission said the militarized approach against drug trafficking intensified the fighting in the half century of conflict that killed hundreds of thousands of Colombians.

The Guatemalan rainforest: Lush jungle, Mayan ruins and narco jets full of cocaine

The Washington-based National Security Archive, an independent nonprofit, provided the commission with declassified documents showing the U.S. government knew its approach would lead to many years of bloodshed in Colombia.

“We see no chance that the growing and trafficking of narcotics in Colombia could be suppressed and kept that way … without a bloody, expensive, and prolonged coercive effort,” read a 1983 national intelligence estimate provided to The Washington Post by the archive.

“One way to stop this war from happening again is to rethink the way we relate to coca and cocaine,”said Estefanía Ciro, who led the truth commission’s drug policy researchers. “The important thing is not that the markets exist or that there is coca, but the violence that the cocaine market produces.”

Finer, Biden's deputy national security adviser, said the Petro administration'sapproach to drug policy overlaps with the holistic strategy the Biden administration announced last year for Colombia. But not on decriminalization.

"Colombia is a sovereign country. It will make its own decisions," he said. "This is a relationship that is bigger and broader than just our cooperation and our collaboration on counternarcotics."

A delegation of U.S. officials, including the assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, plan to meet with Petro administration officials here next week.

USAID Administrator Samantha Power, who attended Petro's inauguration, said U.S. officials "have clearly heard [his] message."

Jim Crotty, a former deputy chief of staff at the DEA, argued that a legal cocaine trade "is not going to get rid of the illegal trade."

"As we've seen before in Colombia and elsewhere, there's always someone to fill that vacuum," Crotty said.

Colombians are currently allowed to carry small amounts of marijuana and cocaine. But proposed legislation aims to go much further, decriminalizing and regulating their use.

Decriminalizing cocaine will face an uphill battle in a divided Congress. Taking the debate to the international stage will be still more difficult.

Honduran president, a Trump ally implicated in drug trafficking, tries to win over Biden

But it's a discussion Latin America has already had — on marijuana. In 2013, Uruguay became the first country in the world to legalize the production and sale of recreational cannabis.

"We have to open up the debate and break the taboo," said Milton Romani, who served as secretary general of Uruguay's national drug board. "It might be a long road, but I don't think it's impossible."

Colombia would have the "moral authority" to lead this effort, he said, "because so many people have died for this."

Mellington Cortés has seen this bloodshed firsthand.

In 2017, he was one of hundreds of coca farmers who were gathered in the Nariño department, protesting forced coca eradication by security forces, when police started firing into the crowd. One gunshot struck him. Another killed his brother, one of seven protesters who died that day. The killings are still under investigation.

The 45-year-old continues to grow coca, whichpays more than twice the $130 a month he made as a driver.

“It’s a secret to no one that we grow coca to survive, to maintain our families, our children,” Cortés said. “There are no other resources here. We’ve been forgotten.”