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## FEATURED Q&A

# How Strong Are U.S.-South America Security Ties?



During his trip to South America this month, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas met with officials including Ecuadorean President Guillermo Lasso (L-R). // Photo: @LassoGuillermo via Twitter.

**Q** U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas traveled to Ecuador and Colombia from Dec. 7-10 to discuss with officials issues including cybersecurity, fighting transnational organized crime, bolstering law enforcement information sharing and managing regional migration. How strong is the countries' current level of cooperation? In what ways can Ecuador and Colombia strengthen cooperation with the United States in matters of security and migration? What are the main achievements that came out of Mayorkas' trip?

**A** **R. Evan Ellis**, Latin America research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute: "Both Colombia and Ecuador are strong partners with respect to security cooperation. Nonetheless, the relationship of each to the specific migratory and security challenges in Secretary Mayorkas' portfolio as Homeland Security secretary are different, explaining why the two engagements were very different. For Colombia, with Venezuelan refugees passing through its territory to the Darién Gap, through Central America and on to the United States, the safe passage of those migrants was a key topic between Mayorkas and President Petro, building on commitments made during the Summit of the Americas. Ecuador, by contrast, despite hosting more than 500,000 Venezuelans, is not on the route of migrants heading for the U.S. border. For Ecuador, thus, talks between President Lasso and Secretary Mayorkas focused more on security cooperation. The Mexico-based Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels fueling unprecedented violence by local gangs in Ecuador are the

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

#### Peru's Boluarte to Replace Prime Minister in Shuffle

Peruvian President Dina Boluarte said Sunday that she will replace her prime minister, Pedro Angulo, as part of a cabinet reshuffle. The statement followed the resignations of the education and culture ministers.

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### BUSINESS

#### Creditors Reject Prepa's Debt Restructuring

Multiple creditors on Friday rejected a new debt restructuring plan for the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, deepening fears of an extended bankruptcy for the utility.

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### ECONOMIC

#### Colombia Seeking 15% Increase in Crude Output

Colombia is seeking to increase its crude oil production by 15 percent, taking advantage of high energy prices, said Mines and Energy Minister Irene Vélez.

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Vélez // File Photo: Colombian Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Peru's Boluarte to Replace Prime Minister in Reshuffle

Peruvian President Dina Boluarte, who took office earlier this month following lawmakers' ouster of her predecessor, said Sunday that she will replace her prime minister as part of a cabinet reshuffle, Reuters reported. Boluarte did not say who she will name as her new prime minister, replacing Pedro Angulo, but she did tell América Televisión in an interview that the change will happen today or Tuesday. "No one can have a minister who will learn on the job," Boluarte said. "This is a transition government; we need to act fast," she added. Boluarte's replacement of the prime minister follows the resignations of her education and culture ministers, who left because of deaths that occurred during violent protests since then-President Pedro Castillo's ouster on Dec. 7, Reuters reported. At least 20 people have been killed in the protests, and more than 500 people, including members of Peru's security forces, have been injured, the Associated Press reported. Boluarte said her new cabinet members, which will work with the country's opposition-led Congress, will be "a little more political," Reuters reported. She added, "We'll be reshaping the cabinet, maybe it will be a more technical cabinet, but also one that's a little more political to be able to create these bridges for dialogue." Castillo frequently clashed with Congress, which tried to remove him from office twice before finally succeeding on its third attempt after Castillo tried to dissolve the legislative body and rule by decree. A judge last week ordered that Castillo be held for 18 months while he is investigated on charges of rebellion and conspiracy. He has denied wrongdoing. Boluarte has called for early elections and on Saturday criticized lawmakers for not endorsing that effort. On Friday, lawmakers rejected her proposal to move elections forward from 2026 to December of next year, the AP reported. In a press conference on Saturday, Boluarte urged legislators to recon-

sider, saying opinion polls show that 80 percent of Peruvians want early general elections, for both the president and Congress, in order to bring stability to the country. "Don't be blind," said Boluarte, the AP reported. "Look at the people and take action in line with what they're asking," she added. Julio Carrión, associate professor of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware, told the Advisor in a **Q&A** published Dec. 9 that Boluarte will find it difficult to move up elections. "It's clear that members of Congress highly value the need to fulfill their terms completely to 2026," said Carrión. "That overriding interest may make it difficult to call for early elections, as many demand," he added.

## Asylum Restrictions on Track to Expire After U.S. Ruling

Restrictions that had kept hundreds of thousands of migrants from seeking asylum over the past few years remain scheduled to expire on Wednesday after a U.S. court last Friday rejected an appeal to extend them, the Associated Press reported. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit rejected an appeal from 19 republican-leaning states to extend the restrictions known as Title 42. Then-President Donald Trump put the measure into effect in 2020, saying it was needed to help prevent the spread of Covid-19.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Colombia Seeking 15% Increase in Crude Oil Output: Minister

Colombia is seeking to increase its production of crude oil by 15 percent by using "enhanced recovery" technologies and taking advantage of high energy pries, the country's minister for mines and energy, Irene Vélez, told Reuters in an interview. "The technology is viable

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Streets Erupt in Celebration as Argentina's Team Wins World Cup

Argentines thronged to the streets Sunday in celebration as the country's national team defeated France's team to win the World Cup. Argentina's team, led by Lionel Messi who had long talked about wanting to win the World Cup, defeated France on penalties after the game had finished 3-3, CNN reported.

## Lasso, Biden Meeting Today at White House

Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso will meet with U.S. President Joe Biden today at the White House to discuss a range of issues including security, Agence France-Presse reported. Featuring prominently on the agenda will be the South American country's struggle against drug cartels, which have exacerbated prison violence. Ecuador's drug-related violence, fueled by its position between Colombia and Peru, two of the world's largest cocaine producers, prompted Lasso to declare a state of emergency in November in parts of the country.

## Brazil's Neoenergia, Eletrobras to Swap Stakes in Hydropower Plants

Brazilian power companies Neoenergia and Eletrobras, a subsidiary of state power utility Eletrobras, on Friday agreed to trade stakes worth 787.8 million reais (\$148 million), Reuters reported. The deal mainly involves exchanging holdings in hydropower plants. Neoenergia will take a 49 percent stake in the Dardanelos hydroelectric plant, and Eletrobras, in turn, will capture 51 percent of the Teles Pires hydroelectric plant, granting it ownership of the company. Eletrobras said the swap will increase its installed capacity to 872 megawatts and grow its revenue by 397 million reais per year.

if—and only if—international prices are high,” said Vélez. The plans come even as President Gustavo Petro’s government is seeking to wean the country’s economy off of extractive industries and further develop renewable energies. Colombia’s oil and gas industries generated 6.4 trillion pesos (\$1.3 billion) in royalties last year, according to the Colombian Petroleum Association. Another industry group, the Colombian Mining Association, estimates that mining will generate 4.84 trillion pesos in royalties this year. [Editor’s note: See related **Q&A** in the July 8 issue of the Dialogue’s weekly Energy Advisor.]

#### BUSINESS NEWS

## Creditors Reject Prepa’s Debt Restructuring Plan

Multiple creditors on Friday rejected a new debt restructuring plan for the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, deepening fears of an extended bankruptcy for the power company, the Associated Press reported. Puerto Rico’s financial oversight board filed a plan that would cut some 40 percent of the \$10 billion debt held by the company, known as Prepa, the main supplier of energy on the island, Bloomberg News reported. Its debt is the largest held by any local government agency, the Associated Press reported. The announcement of the failed negotiations with bondholders came amid a continued economic crisis on the territory, compounded by power bill increases despite chronic outages. “Puerto Rico’s energy challenges are six decades in the making. There is no single factor that can address the lack of a robust power grid on an island that faces multiple federal delays in distributing federal funding,” Rocío M. Vélez, a legal advisor at SGH2 Energy Global told the weekly Energy Advisor in a **Q&A** published Oct. 21. “The Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority is a bankrupt entity that has a history of mismanagement, excessive costs, bureaucracy and lavish lifestyles of a few so-called union leaders,” she added.

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same groups that are orchestrating flows of fentanyl, killing 108,000 in the United States through drug overdoses last year. Cooperation options include expanded intelligence sharing about criminal actors, plus material and resource support to address the gang threat. In Colombia, the principal source of cocaine bound for the United States (although Venezuela is increasingly important as a source country), options for working together are more limited than in the past. Petro’s desire to stop forced eradication of coca, and his ‘total peace’ concept, represent a fundamental shift from more than two decades of U.S.-Colombia security collaboration. The leaders likely discussed disrupting illicit smuggling and the earnings of criminal organizations, to which Petro remains committed.”

**A** **Santiago Mosquera, head of research at Analytica Investments:** “Relations between Ecuador and the United States remain very strong and have strengthened since President Lasso’s inauguration in May of last year. U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas’ visit to the country reinforces the cooperation with local authorities on key issues, including cybersecurity, fighting transnational crime, combating drug trafficking and illegal migration. But there has been some friction. For instance, in recent public appearances, U.S. ambassador Michael Fitzpatrick has been very critical of the Ecuadorean justice system, arguing that judges are not cooperating enough to keep organized crime leaders behind bars. The situation is in contrast with the speed observed in U.S. courts where several Ecuadoreans accused of corruption and money laundering have been charged and are already serving sentences. Ecuador’s Foreign Affairs Minister Juan Carlos Holguín’s response to Ambassador Fitzpatrick centered around government commitment to fight organized crime and drug cartels operating in the country, a decision that has

increased the level of violence inside the jail system and on the streets. Good evidence of such commitment is President Guillermo Lasso’s decision to call a referendum next February that includes a question regarding the possibility of extraditing Ecuadoreans involved in drug cases. If the referendum is approved next year, it would be an important victory for the Lasso administration in its quest to fight crime.”

**A**

#### **Maggie Feldman-Piltch, founder of Unicorn Strategies:**

“Secretary Mayorkas’ trip to Colombia and Ecuador immediately ahead of annual Anti-Corruption Day activities underscores the continued importance and urgency of deep and durable cooperation among three of the Americas’ longest-standing democracies. While engagement already spans focus areas and sectors, there is more work to do. We are all at a critical juncture, and each nation has leadership and partnership responsibilities to meet the moment; the secretary’s participation in setting the agenda of shared priorities, particularly following recent trips by Colombian and Ecuadorian leaders to Washington, communicates this reality. An increasingly volatile security panorama requires best practices from the past, a willingness to innovate as appropriate and commitment to prioritizing the well-being of everyday Americans, Colombians and Ecuadoreans without exception. The three nations are connected by threats that are undeterred by borders—transnational criminal networks, climate change and security, and potential erosion of democratic processes. These shared concerns also create robust opportunities for collaboration and institution building. Combating money laundering and shattering the financial systems that underpin transnational criminal networks, regardless of where they lead, is non-negotiable. This requires trust at the individual and institutional levels that cannot, and should not, appear overnight. It also requires an openness to creative and

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sustained avenues to shift the social calculus around joining these networks. Nevertheless, we must make real progress to include sharing relevant intelligence among partners in governments and other sectors, blanket and durable law enforcement by justice systems rooted in respect for human rights and rule of law, and continuing to work, learn and train together."

**A**ndrei Gomez-Suarez, senior fellow at the Centre for Religion, Reconciliation and Peace at the University of Winchester:

"During his visit to Colombia, Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas met with President Gustavo Petro, Interior Minister Alfonso Prada Gil, Defense Minister Iván Velásquez Gómez and Foreign Minister Álvaro Leyva to discuss illegal migration and the dignity of migrants. The concerns of migration in Colombia are related to the Darién Gap, which 280,000 people have crossed to make their way to the United States. To tackle the migration issue from a regional perspective, Leyva and Mayorkas announced the organization of Latin American Conference on Migration during the first half of 2023. However, the challenges for tackling illegal migration are enormous, as President Petro

recognized: stopping people from migrating means offering poor people economic justice, which in coca-producing countries is connected to a change of paradigm in the war on drugs. Mayorkas' visit demonstrates that U.S.-Colombian relations are going

**“ Stopping people from migrating means offering poor people economic justice...”**

— Andrei Gomez-Suarez

through a good moment. This is a first good step to deal with the challenges of migration in Latin America, but it remains to be seen if the developments in Peru, after the ouster of Pedro Castillo, the negotiations between Nicolás Maduro and the Venezuelan opposition, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's comeback in Brazil, will support the hosting of a conference that paves the way for a regional solution to migration which is also key for Petro's total peace policy."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.*

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