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Back from the Brink: Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999-2007 (CSIS Reports)

Peter DeShazo, Tanya Primiani, Phillip McLean

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Colombia is important to the United States. It is one of our best friends in Latin America, a longstanding democracy with which we have close economic and strategically important bilateral ties. We are also linked to Colombia through the unfortunate relationship of major consumer to leading supplier of cocaine, but that factor also highlights the importance of cooperation between our countries. It is no secret that Colombia is beset by difficult problems. Illegal armed groups and powerful drug gangs continue to challenge the rule of law in parts of the country. The presence of these violent elements fuels other problems: crime, human rights abuses, poverty, and a weakening of governance. Indeed, during the 1990s, a confluence of highly negative factors threatened to drag the country down. Taken out of context, these challenges might be seen as nearly insurmountable. In fact, however, Colombia's situation in 2007 represents a major improvement over that earlier period. Colombia's emergence from crisis constitutes a success story. It is, however, a story that is not well known, despite the fact that billions of dollars in military and economic assistance from the United States helped bring Colombia "back from the brink." This report provides a timely and balanced examination of the difficult issues at stake in Colombia and the U.S.-Colombia relationship. It analyzes the factors that took Colombia to the verge of unraveling in the late 1990s and how the country began to make its way back from instability. Then the report evaluates the impressive progress made between 1999 and 2007 across a broad spectrum of difficult issues, as well as the thorny problems that persist.

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