

Building a new consensus

INTERVIEW WITH MARÍA ÁNGELA HOLGUÍN

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MARÍA ÁNGELA HOLGUÍN

is a political science and diplomacy graduate with twenty years' experience in the public and private sectors, as well as vast experience in Colombian foreign policy. She has held various posts in the Colombian Government and Diplomatic Corps, including Colombian Ambassador to Venezuela (2002-04), Permanent Representative of Colombia to the United Nations (2004-06) and Director for the Office of the Vice-President (2006-2008). She was appointed Foreign Minister by President Santos in 2010, and since May 2015, has also been part of the Colombian Government's negotiation team in the Peace Talks with the FARC.

Just a few years ago, Colombia was one of the most isolated countries in Latin America. How important has the peace process been to the transformation of Colombia's relations with its neighbours and its standing in the wider world?

Colombia has transformed its reality in the last decade. The peace process is a result of the fundamental changes in our society over the past few years. We were never really as isolated as you suggest. We have our challenges, as do other countries in the world. For example, the drug problem is a universal one. The difference in approach is that Colombia decided to fight it openly, while other nations in the world took longer to admit that narcotics deeply affect all of our societies. So, Colombia had a stigma but eventually the international community understood that international crime affects us all, regardless of its manifestation in our specific realities.

The end of the conflict and the construction of peace will bring security, social and economic dividends to all Colombians. A peaceful Colombia will benefit our entire region. That is why we have received the resolute support we have from the international community, and we hope to maintain its interest and commitment to our peace-building plans and strategies.

How have the country's international partners reacted to the result of the plebiscite? What can they, and others, do to help move the process forward?

The international community reiterated its support to the peace process after the results of the plebiscite. President Santos has received dozens of calls and messages from world leaders in support of his decision to persist in the quest for peace. The international community will continue to play a fundamental role in providing broad legitimacy to the peace process. This continued involvement is helping us in our efforts to listen and to make the necessary adjustments in order to finalise the agreement with the FARC. This will allow Colombians to reconcile, live in peace and have the opportunity to imagine a life without conflict. We need the international community to maintain its support and presence.

How does Colombia intend to wield its enhanced influence on the world stage? What do you regard as the country's key foreign policy objectives?

Colombia has been an active member of the international community. We interact with other States

respecting the principles and purposes of peaceful coexistence of the Charter of the UN. In multilateral relations Colombia was one of the original promoters of the Sustainable Development Goals that were finally, after long negotiations, adopted in the UN as a framework for national and global development strategies in the years to come.

In our foreign policy we aim to improve our citizens' well-being through the promotion of constructive agendas both in bilateral, regional and multilateral scenarios.

Colombia continues to strengthen its international leadership in areas like peace, security and stability; climate change and environmental protection.

President Santos has appointed you, his foreign policy chief to lead the talks with representatives of the 'No' campaign. Is this a tacit acknowledgement that the country is now seriously divided – that there are, in effect, two Colombias?

Colombia is a strong democracy and the democratic debate both is a guarantee and a sign of the strength of our institutions. After the result of the plebiscite, immediately accepted by President Santos and the government, we started a series of meetings with the 'No' supporters to listen to their proposals. The idea is to introduce adjustments and changes to the agreement negotiated with the FARC in order to reach a new agreement allowing the broadest possible representation to allow the transition to peace and reconciliation.

How significant is the State Visit to the UK, in the light of recent events? What opportunities for enhanced cooperation do you see arising from the UK's decision to leave the European Union?

The United Kingdom has been a key ally of Colombia for many years, and we share a dynamic bilateral relationship. So, the first State Visit of a Colombian President to the UK will be an ideal platform to strengthen our common agenda for the coming years. We will continue working to increase our economic and investment opportunities to improve the well-being of the citizens of both our nations. Issues like support for the peace process and implementation of the post-conflict, strengthening our longstanding security cooperation, new cooperation initiatives on justice and good governance, as well as increased collaboration on sustainable development will be at the heart of our agenda moving forward.