

Editorial

Total peace, a quest for peace between bilateral and multilateral

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Aun cuando perduren conflictos, violencia, o sentimientos de venganza, no impidamos que la justicia y la misericordia se encuentren en un abrazo que asuma la historia de dolor de Colombia.

Papa Francisco

According to the implementation of the Total Peace policy, President Gustavo Petro (2022–2026) sought to differentiate himself from the partial peace policy pursued under the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), who first negotiated between 2012 and 2016 with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC-EP) and later with the National Liberation Army (ELN)—signing an agenda agreement and a bilateral ceasefire—and also from the Peace with Legality policy of former President Iván Duque (2018–2022), who ultimately closed the door to dialogue with any armed group (Archila & Duque, 2021).

At the outset, the Total Peace policy was embodied in Law 2272 of 2022 (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 2022) as President Petro’s commitment to removing all illegal armed groups from war through negotiation. It offered processes of political dialogue for those groups that continuously exercise violence in an organized way, with recognized or responsible command in various regions of the country. It even opened the door to collective submission to justice through unprecedented socio-legal dialogue spaces with groups not classified as insurgencies, which the law called *organized armed structures of high-impact crime*.

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Compared with other peace dialogue initiatives of the past two decades, Total Peace is bold and innovative (Velandia, 2024; Castillo, 2024). Looking back, it is evident that in the last twenty years, all previous governments either chose to negotiate with only one-armed group at a time, or they opened the door to several groups but concentrated their efforts, energy, and resources on just one. Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) and Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) prioritized negotiations with the FARC-EP, and although Santos also began talks with the ELN, most of the effort clearly focused on the FARC-EP. Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) prioritized negotiations with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and did not sign peace with any other group, despite seeking approaches. Iván Duque (2018–2022) was the only president to shut down all avenues of negotiation with armed actors, including the ongoing talks with the ELN.

The proposal for political negotiation and collective submission to justice was made by President Petro when he took office at Casa de Nariño on August 7, 2022. At that moment, he found a country where armed conflict was on the rise (Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 2022). Colombia had moved from a period of relative peace, with violence indicators below those of the early 1980s, to a context of generalized violence growth beginning in 2018. Several organized armed groups possessed the resources to regularly and sustainably exercise power and control over the population, with unified command (Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 2024).

In response, Gustavo Petro offered all these groups the possibility of sitting down to negotiate peace, regardless of whether they were recognized as political actors or not—political negotiations with the former and collective submission to justice with the latter (Durán & García, 2024, p. 10). With the support of congressional allies led by Senator Iván Cepeda, president of the Accidental Peace Commission, and under the leadership of the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, the Government drafted a bill that envisioned a negotiated exit from conflict as a strategy to improve public order and increase security nationwide. The Total Peace Law reactivated the strategy of negotiating with all actors, either at separate tables or through a joint table including multiple armed groups.

With the powers granted by this law and the authority conferred by the 1991 Political Constitution, the Government made progress on several fronts. Notable actions included: establishing a negotiation table with the ELN, declaring a multilateral ceasefire on December 31, 2022, and opening dialogue tables with the Central General Staff of the FARC-EP—dissidents who neither signed the 2016 peace agreement nor demobilized—, with the Second Marquetalia—reconstituted from the FARC-EP under the leadership of Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez,” who took up arms again in 2019—, as well as with other criminal armed groups active in regions such as Aburrá Valley, Buenaventura, and Quibdó (Table 1).

Table 1. *Establishment of Dialogues under the Government of Gustavo Petro, 2022–2024*

#	Place	Date	Type of dialogue	Grupos armados ilegales que integran la mesa de conversaciones
1	La Habana (Cuba)	21 de noviembre del 2022	Bilateral	ELN
2	Itagüí (Valle de Aburrá)	2 de junio del 2023	Multilateral	Oficina de Envisado (integrada por catorce bandas como El Mesa, Pachelly, Los Pesebreros, Los Triana, Chatas, Niquía, Camacol y La Terraza)
3	Buenaventura (Valle del Cauca)	18 de julio del 2023	Multilateral	Los Shottas y Los Espartanos
4	Quibdó (Chocó)	18 de agosto del 2023	Multilateral	Los RPS, Los Locos Yam y Los Mexicanos
5	Tibú (Norte de Santander)	17 de octubre del 2023	Multilateral	Estado Mayor Central de las FARC-EP (organización conformada por tres facciones)
6	Caracas (Venezuela)	24 de junio del 2024	Bilateral	Segunda Marquetalia
7	Pasto (Nariño)	21 de julio del 2024	Bilateral	Frente Comuneros del Sur (disidencia del ELN)
8	Sin dato	1 de agosto del 2024	Bilateral	Los Pachenca o Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada
9	Sin dato	1 de agosto del 2024	Bilateral	Clan del Golfo o Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia

Finding answers to the question of how many actors should be simultaneously involved in a negotiation has become a key factor in the success of any political or economic process. In diplomacy and international relations, debates often focus on whether bilateral negotiations—between two actors—or multilateral ones—three or more parties—are more effective. The former allows interests to be more limited, facilitating quicker execution of the negotiation agenda. However, it makes the strengths and weaknesses of each party more visible, which may not be well received. In contrast, the latter tends to present more diverse positions, and weaker actors may benefit from the greater weight of others to strengthen their stance (Berridge, 2005, cited in Játiva, 2019).

In peace negotiations specifically, the literature is increasingly extensive and presents arguments for and against both options: those involving only the two main conflict actors and those involving other agents such as external guarantors, accompanying parties, or even civil society (Valencia & Villareal, 2020). A government has four main options: (1) negotiate with a single armed actor; (2) negotiate with multiple actors simultaneously but at separate tables; (3) negotiate with several actors at the same table; and (4) negotiate sequentially with different groups (Table 2).

Table 2. *Potential stakeholders in peace negotiation tables*

Number of armed groups participating in the peace talks	Negotiating sides	Type of dialogue
Un solo actor armado	Gobierno y actor 1	Diálogo bilateral
Dos actores armados	Gobierno, actor 1 y actor 2	Diálogo tripartito o multilateral
Más de tres actores armados	Gobierno, actor 1, actor 2, actor 3 o más	Diálogo multilateral

In general, the approaches that analyse peace processes highlight the advantages of negotiations between the two agents directly involved in the conflict (Camilión, 1987).

The optimal scenario in a peace process is to have few actors, but that is not always possible, and sometimes it is necessary to negotiate with a multiplicity of them. On some occasions, one actor splits into factions when entering negotiations, usually because certain individuals want to take advantage of the process and maintain spheres of power, even through the use of weapons. [...] The greater the number of violent actors, the greater the complexity and difficulty in reaching an agreement. However, it is important to ensure that none of them remain outside the negotiation, given their destructive and process-sabotaging potential. (Fisas, 2010, p. 40).

This approach is considered more efficient because the positions are clearer and cooperation scenarios can be reached that facilitate a quicker resolution of the conflict, which is appropriate in the context of negotiations.

In this regard, both theory and experience in peace processes indicate that face-to-face negotiation between two armed actors has great advantages (Camilión, 1987). In these situations, agreements on substantive, procedural, and operational issues work with greater agility. In negotiations involving only two actors, consensus is easier to reach, since what one group requests is generally also granted to the other, allowing the negotiation table to remain balanced, with equal representation and the accompaniment of guarantor countries approved by both parties.

On the other hand, multilateral negotiations tend to be more complex. Whether negotiations begin with one adversary at an exclusive table and then move on to others in sequence, or whether a joint table that includes all actors is chosen, both approaches present challenges. In the first case, the discussion revolves around who should be invited first: the strongest opponent or one of the weakest. Negotiating with the most powerful actor—whether in military, political, or economic terms—has the advantage of balancing forces, operating more quickly, building trust, and advancing on key points of the conflict (Mirabal, 2003). Furthermore, if a final agreement is reached, it helps to “clear the way” by removing the most relevant actor from the conflict, sending positive signals to the rest of the negotiations.

The problem with this type of process, where one actor is invited first and others later, is that while peace is being negotiated with one, war continues with the rest. In this situation, the actors still in dispute will seek to use violence as a strategy to strengthen their political, military, or economic positions (Grasa & Mateos, 2014). They will employ weapons forcefully so that, when they are invited to the negotiation table, they arrive in a stronger position vis-à-vis the Government and can make demands equal to or greater than those of the first group negotiated with. There is a risk that the Government, faced with such a scenario, may decide not to invite them to negotiations or to abandon the process altogether, which would lead to a deepening of conflict and violence in the territories.

As for negotiations with multiple actors simultaneously, whether at separate tables or at the same table, the implications—both positive and negative—are varied: in both situations, the actors involved use the instruments of power at their disposal to achieve their objectives. As in international negotiations, the stronger actors seek to take greater advantage of their position, while the weaker ones try to leverage the power of the stronger to increase their own benefits. For example, they might threaten to withdraw from the process and return to war, or break partial agreements such as humanitarian aid if they are not granted the same concessions as the stronger ones, which could put the entire process at risk.

Theory and reality show that negotiations with multiple actors simultaneously tend to reveal or accentuate ideological differences (Diez, 2000). For example, in a country with multiple armed actors, it is likely that some oppose the State and seek to overthrow the legitimately elected government, while others, lacking the strength to take control, confront the security forces with the intention of resisting and maintaining their territorial presence. There may even be actors involved in the conflict, such as paramilitarism in Colombia, whose purpose is to attack guerrilla groups and defend the State. In other words, these are illegal armed groups with different, opposing, or mutually exclusive objectives (Fisas, 1998).

Under these circumstances, consensus becomes nearly impossible. A joint or multilateral dialogue table could greatly complicate negotiations, allow only minimal agreements, and generate new conflicts. For this reason, on some occasions, the armed actors themselves demand that their ideology be respected and that they be treated at separate tables. This frequently leads multilateral negotiations to dissolve into one table and then give way to parallel negotiations with each group. Furthermore, methodological problems in operational and procedural matters are often significant, since actors compare themselves with each other, and larger groups seek greater representation and influence in decision-making, generating discontent and protests among smaller groups, who demand equality.

On very rare occasions, negotiations with multiple actors at the same table prove successful. In these cases, the key to obtaining the best results lies in cooperation among the participants (Mirabal, 2003). However, alliances or coalitions are very difficult to achieve. As mentioned earlier, some actors try to take advantage of collective negotiation, which may generate mistrust among the members of the coalition and eventually lead to its dissolution.

Ultimately, multilateral dialogues can be seen as a game of strategies and positions where differences and particular interests emerge. It is a process that can be long and complex, in which each actor seeks to be heard and taken into account. A process where progress may be scarce, agreements difficult to reach, and results slow (Fisas, 2010). The consensus is that negotiating at one table with several illegal armed groups almost always prolongs the dialogue, delaying the signing of a final agreement or the end of the conflict.

Therefore, the key factor for achieving successful multilateral negotiations lies in the way the Government—holding the best strategic position—guides the process. This involves setting up sound programmatic structures, selecting experts to support the process and provide ideas, appointing negotiators capable of generating trust among all actors, and directing the negotiation table or tables if parallel negotiations are chosen. Although this makes the peace process more costly by duplicating the Government's negotiation fronts, it also increases the likelihood of achieving positive results.

In short, peace negotiations with one, several, or all actors offer both advantages and disadvantages. That is precisely the greatest paradox of President Petro's Total Peace policy. The option of negotiating with a single actor seems to be the one with the greatest strengths, both in theory and in practice. Negotiations with a single actor, for both the Government and the armed group, provide simplicity, agility, and effectiveness in dialogue and in the signing of agreements. On the other hand, the multiplicity of actors, as often happens in politics, causes differences to surface more than consensus and desires for unification. In this scenario, alliances and coalitions could help gain significant leverage against the State or the actor seeking to maintain the monopoly of power, but it is very difficult to reach agreements with diverse actors, especially when they themselves are engaged in an internal armed conflict.

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