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## Colombia: potential directions in foreign policy after Uribe

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By **Guy Burton**

What implications will the Colombian constitutional court's decision to deny President Alvaro Uribe's bid for a third term have on the fate of the country's foreign policy? The decision now means that Colombia will have a new president later this year and at present the choice appears far from certain.

Uribe remains a popular figure in Colombia, on account of his strong approach to public security and the ongoing guerrilla conflict. However, this stance has led to tensions with his neighbours, including Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez, who has voiced concerns at [growing US military presence and bases in Colombia](#) (and which was discussed at an LSE Ideas Centre [event](#) earlier this month), and with Ecuador's Rafael Correa, following the Colombian army's cross-border raid against a FARC leader.

Within Colombia Uribe's appeal has largely been personal and reflected in his defeat of the traditional Conservative and Liberal parties in the 2002 and 2006 elections. Nevertheless, his support of US objectives and commitment to free trade marks him out as both the US's closest ally in the region and a conservative. Consequently, who becomes Colombia's next president may well emerge from the right of the political spectrum and continue the present direction in foreign policy. This would have significant regional implications, especially in the new president's dealings with Ecuador and Venezuela.

At present the Colombian newspaper, [El Tiempo](#), reports that there are seven potential candidates for the presidency, although none of them have a significant level of support. Juan Manuel Santos looks like the strongest potential candidate from Uribe's own organisation, the party 'of the U'. As a former defence minister he has already courted controversy, presiding over the operation that infringed Ecuadorian sovereignty and misuse of the Red Cross symbol during the operation to free the kidnapped former presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt from the FARC. One might therefore expect a great degree of continuity in Colombia's foreign policies and arguably persisting tension between Colombia and its neighbours were he elected.

However, whether Santos is a viable candidate will depend on the Conservative Party's choice of candidate in its primary next month. If the former agricultural minister, Andrés Felipe Arias, wins the then a coalition may be achieved with Santos for the first round of the election. Arias has been a strong supporter of Uribe in the past, being among the first to defend his links with paramilitary groups. By contrast, if Noemí Sanín wins, it is likely that Colombian conservatism will be split. A former peace negotiator with the FARC during the Betancour presidency (1982-1986) and Colombia's foreign minister (1991-94), she ran for the presidency in 1998 and 2002. During the latter she was especially critical of Uribe's paramilitary connections. If she were to mount a serious challenge for the presidency this time, Colombia's regional relations could potentially be less confrontational.

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