What future will emerge from the collision of Colombian government and guerrilla strategies? There are several alternate scenarios for Colombia (although we recognize that the country could move sequentially through one or more of these on its trajectory to what ultimately might be a more stable state). We will describe each in turn, and in the process try to answer some of the key questions about the intentions, capabilities, and calculations of the main actors in this drama.

**SCENARIO 1: SUCCESSFUL PEACE AGREEMENT**

A peace agreement, if reached, could take one of two basic forms. The Central American model involves the negotiation of arrangements that provide for the end of the armed conflicts, the incorporation of former insurgents into the political process, and the adjudication of issues of governance through competitive elections. In the case of El Salvador, the transition from civil war to peace and reconciliation went through two stages. The first stage involved the implementation of the basic elements in the peace accords, with international verification. The FMLN guerrillas agreed to lay down their arms and demobilize. The Salvadoran armed forces were reduced in size and restructured, with their role limited to external defense. The records of military officers were reviewed by an ad hoc commission so that those responsible for human rights violations would be discharged or transferred. The security forces—National Police, Treasury Police, and National Guard—were disbanded and replaced with a National Civil Police. The second stage involved the
consolidation of democratic norms, institutions, and practices. A Truth Commission was established to bring to light the truth about acts of violence in the preceding decade. New institutions, such as the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Procuraduría para la Defense de los Derechos Humanos), were established to ensure public security and respect for human rights.1

An agreement based on this model is the preferred outcome for the Pastrana administration and the majority of Colombians. However, as discussed in the preceding chapter, there has been little or no progress on the fundamental issues of demobilization and development of a political framework that would permit the incorporation of the guerrillas into normal politics.

A variation of a peace agreement would fall short of the Central American standard of demobilization and political restructuring. In this variation, the two sides could agree on what amounts to a cease-fire—and perhaps a partial demobilization of the guerrillas, but with the guerrillas retaining control of areas where they are currently dominant. A reported Colombian government plan in 1991 contemplated the establishment of some 60 “mini-demilitarized zones” throughout the country as part of a peace settlement.2 This scenario could move the country in either of two directions. In the best (but unlikely) case, it could be a transitional stage on the way to a comprehensive peace agreement. Conversely, it could lead to a fragmentation scenario by sanctioning a de facto partition of Colombia into government-controlled and guerrilla-controlled areas.3

SCENARIO 2: TURNING THE TIDE

In this scenario, the government gains the upper hand. The Colombian government and military get a handle on the political-military situation and begin to gain the upper hand in the struggle against the

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1See Arnson, pp. 70–95, 394–396.
3A peace scenario would also require the participation or acquiescence of the illegal self-defense forces, given that the guerrillas are unlikely to agree to demobilize without parallel demobilization by other armed groups.
guerrillas and other illegal armed groups. This scenario assumes that the Colombian army is able to seize the strategic and operational initiative from the guerrillas and establish effective area control. (See Chapter Ten for details on Colombian military requirements.) Turning the tide may require retaking the FARC-controlled “demilitarized zone” in order to deprive the guerrillas of sanctuaries and to disrupt their infrastructure—particularly the critical logistics and troop mobility corridors.

If this scenario were to develop, it could create the conditions for a peace agreement. The guerrillas would realize that the war cannot be won and that continuing on that path would lead to defeat. This could lead to a “Guatemalan” or “Salvadoran” solution.

On the other hand, if the guerrillas came to the realization that their ability to influence the outcome of the war was waning, they might be driven to an all-out military effort, possibly calibrated to have the maximum psychological impact on the Colombian government and people and Colombia’s international supporters. This effort could involve such spectacular actions as an attack on Bogotá and other major cities (the “Tet offensive” option); an attempt to take the Colombian government forward base at Tres Esquinas in Putumayo, the prospective base for the army’s new counter-narcotics battalions (the “Khe Sanh” option); or an ambush of one of the counter-narcotics battalions in FARC-dominated territory in southern Colombia.

**SCENARIO 3: STALEMATE**

Neither the government nor the guerrillas can attain a military victory over the other. This scenario is viewed as the most plausible by some observers. As in the case of El Salvador, a stalemate could continue for a prolonged period. However, a stalemate may not prove to be a stable condition, and over time the balance will likely shift to one side or the other. The shift, if it occurs, could be rapid and lead to a sudden collapse of one of the sides (cf. China in 1949, Cuba in 1959, and Nicaragua in 1979).
SCENARIO 4: THE PERUVIAN MODEL

In this scenario—the *fujimorazo* in the Colombian vernacular—desperate Colombians look to former Peruvian President Fujimori’s defeat of the Shining Path insurgency in the early 1990s as a model for Colombia. The Peruvian model would involve breaking negotiations and unleashing the full force of the state’s military and security apparatus against the guerrillas. A decision to wage all-out war against the guerrillas would probably lower any priority on legal rights and introduce such practices as trials of suspected guerrillas or collaborators by secret military courts. It would also imply a decision by the Colombian government to “go it alone,” because the United States and European donors could react by curtailing aid. This scenario would become more likely in the event of continued deterioration and loss of confidence by the Colombian people in the current strategy. As in the case of Peru, it could be initiated by government leaders themselves, with the support of the military, or by the military, with the support of political leaders (as in the 1953 military coup that brought to power Colombia’s only military government in the 20th century).

SCENARIO 5: DISINTEGRATION

Deterioration continues and the war degenerates into an all-out struggle between the self-defense forces and the FARC. The government is unable to cope with the escalating violence and withdraws to the capital and some of the major cities. Government at the local level is coopted by armed groups, as has already occurred to some degree in many areas. Autonomous power centers emerge where local military commanders assume political leadership roles and join forces with self-defense groups. The situation could resemble Mexico after the 1910 Revolution, with regionally based armies vying for control of the symbols of central authority.

SCENARIO 6: FARC TAKEOVER OR POWER-SHARING

Deterioration continues, leading to a takeover by the FARC or to a peace agreement heavily tilted toward the FARC. In the first variation, the FARC could establish a state that will likely replicate Cuban characteristics, including a centralized authoritarian political system,
dissolution of the armed forces and the political structures of the old regime, nationalization of large sectors of the economy and controls on economic activity, an “anti-imperialist” foreign policy, and the exodus of much of the Colombian middle class. The second variation could involve a peace agreement heavily tilted toward the FARC. It could include a coalition government acceptable to the FARC, a power-sharing arrangement that leaves the FARC in charge of large parts of Colombia (including the coca-growing regions), and the removal of U.S. influence.

SCENARIO 7: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CONFLICT

As noted earlier, the armed conflict in Colombia has already spilled over to its neighbors. In this scenario, a FARC victory (or impending victory) could impel neighboring states to seek multilateral intervention, possibly under the umbrella of the Organization of American States (as in the Dominican Republic in 1964). The incentive for this course of action would be great if there appeared to be a possibility of the restoration of the Colombian government. If threatened by outside intervention, the FARC could seek to attack targets outside of Colombia, such as the Panama Canal locks, and step up support of other Latin American radical groups. Such a development would likely reenergize radical movements and armed insurgencies from Peru to Mexico that have been defused or contained over the past decade. The worst-case variation would be an alliance of a FARC government in Colombia with a radicalized government in Venezuela and the destabilization of Ecuador and Peru, leading to the emergence of a belt of radical states across northern and western South America.

PROBABLE FUTURE PATH

The interaction of the trend lines described in the preceding chapters will determine which of these Colombian futures occurs. Although the direction of the trends is not positive, the deterioration of the Colombian government’s position has not reached an irreversible stage. Currently there is a stalemate, with all sides preparing for an intensified level of violence. The catalyst is expected to be the government’s implementation of the “Drive to the South” anticipated in Plan Colombia. Alternatively, the FARC could decide to preempt the
government’s advance in Putumayo by escalating the war in other parts of Colombia. This new phase of the war could witness the use of surface-to-air missiles by the guerrillas to deny the government use of helicopters and aircraft or inflict a major defeat on one of the new counter-narcotics battalions. Escalation of the fighting will likely be accompanied by mobilization of the civilian population in the guerrilla-controlled areas to oppose government counter-narcotics operations. Through its international support network, the FARC can also be expected to seek to deny international assistance to the Colombian government.

As noted earlier, a stalemate is not likely to be stable at an intensified level of violence, and over time the balance will tilt to one side or the other. The Colombian government, left to its own devices, does not have the institutional or material resources to reverse unfavorable trends, but the FARC also has weaknesses that could be exploited. The FARC’s political weakness—lack of support among the population at large—raises the possibility that the guerrilla threat could be contained or defeated if the government succeeds in enlisting active popular support and seizing the strategic and operational initiative.

U.S. assistance to the Colombian government and armed forces in developing an effective strategy and acquiring the capabilities to implement it will be an important factor influencing Colombia’s path. That factor, together with Bogotá’s receptivity to innovation in its politico-military approach, will have a major influence on whether the Colombian government is able to turn the tide or whether deterioration continues, leading to one of the downside scenarios described above.

In any intensified conflict scenario—regardless of which side holds the advantage—the regional effects of the Colombian situation are likely to become amplified. The next chapter analyzes the effect of the Colombian conflict on neighboring states and the prospects that it will metastasize into a wider regional upheaval.