

TOTAL PEACE, COMPLEX PEACE

Analysis of a New Peace Policy in Colombia

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Total Peace, Complex Peace
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Puzzle on a wall, Askhan Forouzani (Unsplash).

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Abstract

This paper examines Colombia's Total Peace policy from 2022 to July 2024 through the lens of negotiation and conflict resolution literature. Total Peace, which involves negotiating with nine armed groups while simultaneously implementing the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas, serves as a case study to explore how the multiplicity and diversity of actors have influenced the complexity of the process and the parties' readiness to negotiate.

This paper highlights how multiple interdependent actors, negotiation principles, and alternatives shape and increase the complexity of peace negotiations. It analyzes these dynamic factors and their impact on complexity, uncertainty, and readiness, offering valuable insights and contributions to both research and practice in the field.

1 Introduction

Recent literature in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution has introduced a new approach to understanding peace negotiations as complex systems. In this view, multiple actors engage with numerous variables within interacting structures, leading to unforeseeable dynamics (Arévalo, 2024; Kozina et al., 2020; Gray, 2011). This creates an opportunity to analyze the Colombian Total Peace policy as an empirical case study, where the government has aimed to negotiate simultaneously with nine different armed groups, while implementing the 2016 peace agreement reached with the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) guerrillas.

During the first two years of negotiations, Total Peace was characterized as “ambitious” (Castillo, 2023) and “complex” (Suesca, 2024) due to several factors involving the multiple actors that participate in the process (Rodríguez, 2024; La Silla Vacía, 2024); the abstract principles and rules, with formal agendas lacking in most tables (La Silla Vacía, 2024); the ceasefires that have been diluted due to non-compliance, lack of protocols, and verification mechanisms (Grasa, 2024); and the expansion and strengthening of armed groups across Colombian territory in recent years (Preciado et al., 2023; Rodríguez Álvarez, 2024).

Given these considerations, this article focuses on how the multiplicity and diversity of actors in the peace process from 2022 to July 2024 have influenced the complexity of the *Total Peace* policy and the parties’ readiness to negotiate. The central premise is that the process’ complexity has been impacted by the involvement of multiple interdependent actors and issues, the design, structure, and negotiation principles, and the parties’ alternatives to a negotiated agreement, creating greater uncertainty around the parties’ efforts to reach an agreement in a feedback loop.

This research aims to contribute to the peacemaking field by offering insights and practical recommendations for scholars and conflict practitioners by analyzing the first two years of the peace process developments in Colombia. In particular, this article highlights the need to focus on negotiation process design and public policy coordination, as well as considering alternatives to manage multi-actor negotiation complexity and foster conflict transformation in uncertain scenarios.

2 Theoretical framework

This study examines the Total Peace policy by following three strands of literature: conflict resolution theory, multi-actor negotiation, and strategic negotiation planning. This section will present each strand in turn.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution literature has broadly focused on the substance of peace negotiations, the timing of these efforts, and their outcomes (Zartman, 2008). To understand the conditions that make peace negotiation possible, Zartman (1989) introduces *Ripeness Theory*, which examines the necessary conditions for parties to engage in peace talks; the first is a *Mutually Hurting Stalemate*, where parties recognize a conflict deadlock, which motivates them to dialogue to prevent further escalation. The second is a *Mutually Perceived Way Out*, where parties believe negotiation efforts can offer a satisfactory and mutual solution (Zartman, 2008; Pruitt, 2005).

However, complementing Zartman's (1989), Pruitt (2005) argues that parties are not always well-informed, dispassionate, and rational decision-makers when identifying the objective elements of ripeness and, thus, do not always recognize the optimal time to negotiate. Therefore, the author proposes *Readiness Theory* as an extension of Zartman's (1989) work, emphasizing the need to analyze separately each party's reasons for negotiating on two different levels of readiness: 1) *Motivation to end the conflict*, which arises from the perception that the conflict is dysfunctional in terms of winners and losers, costs, and risks; and 2) *Optimism*, which results in each party's sense to locate a mutually acceptable agreement (Pruitt, 2005). *Readiness Theory* proposes a "multiple causal factor model, which treats the antecedents of readiness and ripeness as variables (...) that can be stronger or weaker and that can affect the likelihood [for a "successful" negotiation]" (Pruitt, 2005, p. 9).

By understanding each party's motivations and incentives for reaching an agreement, it becomes clear that while the primary goal of negotiation is to explore beneficial options for a mutually acceptable agreement, parties sometimes have undisclosed interests that drive them to engage in negotiation without intending to reach a resolution. This is the premise of *False Negotiation or False Readiness Theory* (Glozman et al., 2014). According to this theory, parties may enter negotiations to achieve "ulterior [individual] goals," such as enhancing their reputation, gathering intelligence about the other party, or gaining legitimacy while keeping the process alive and strengthening their positions both inside and outside the negotiation table. Engaging in negotiations without intending to reach an agreeable solution can lead to complex and stagnant dialogue.

Therefore, it is possible to recognize that, in contrast to *Ripeness* (Zartman, 1989) and *Readiness* (Pruitt, 2005), the development of peace talks results not only from shared or individual conditions at the beginning of the negotiation but also from constant interactions of variables and factors throughout the process. Consequently, according to the *Uncertain Readiness Theory* (Arévalo, 2024), the decision on how to engage in a peace negotiation is not "exogenous to, let alone prior to, the negotiation but rather the result of the interplay between the structural variables of the conflict and how the complexity of the negotiation is managed." (2024: page 3) The author suggests that the beginning of peace negotiations is a scenario of "uncertain readiness," as parties are unsure how their interactions in the negotiation process will unfold, which could create more or less complexity, impacting the parties' readiness and their opportunity for resolution. As a consequence, peace negotiations should be understood as

complex, unpredictable systems where it is not possible to isolate individual causal effects. *Uncertain Readiness Theory* explores three drivers of complexity: 1) the Negotiation Task; 2) the Dynamic Variables of the Negotiators, and 3) the Negotiation Context.

Given the subject in this paper, where multiple armed groups negotiate with the government, multiparty or multi-actor negotiation theories provide additional insights into complexity management. Andrej Kozina et al. (2020) argue that as the number of actors in a negotiation increases, it becomes progressively difficult to reach a satisfactory agreement. According to the authors, multiparty negotiations should be treated as “complex ventures or projects” where parties interact with each other “in many different ways” (2020: page 122). In other words, “negotiations involving multiple parties are complex because of the potential number of interacting variables” (2020: page 123). This coincides with Gray (2011), who explains that multiparty negotiations are inherently complex due to the numerous interactions among the parties, which can slow the pace of negotiations and heighten the process' unpredictability, fragility, and volatility. This complexity is particularly pronounced as the parties' relationships and interactions can vary widely.

Deutsch (2014) explores this issue, emphasizing that the nature of the relationship between parties significantly shapes negotiation outcomes. According to his *Theory of Cooperation and Competition*, a cooperative relationship among parties tends to foster mutually beneficial or win-win results. Conversely, a competitive relationship is more likely to lead to win-lose or lose-lose outcomes (Deutsch, 2014). Building on Deutsch's insights, David and Roger Johnson (2012) introduced the *Social Interdependence Theory*, which also adopts a systemic perspective on these issues. They argue that parties in conflict may establish either positive or negative interdependence, which respectively leads to cooperative or competitive relationships. According to Johnson and Johnson (2012), positive interdependence is characterized by individual actions that support achieving shared goals. In contrast, negative interdependence arises when individual actions obstruct the achievement of others' goals.

In parallel, as the negotiation process evolves, parties can navigate the inherent systemic ambiguity of these scenarios by addressing information gaps and determining the level of effort they are willing to invest in the process (Arévalo, 2024). One way to fill these information gaps and understand if parties are genuinely committed to the negotiation process is by evaluating their BATNA (*Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement*) (Fisher et al., 2011). This principle reflects each party's alternative scenario in case they cannot reach an agreement. If a party's BATNA is strong, the alternative scenario will not be significantly worse than the agreement that could have been negotiated; therefore, the incentives and determination to seek an agreement are lower. Conversely, if the BATNA is weak, there will be a greater need to negotiate, as the alternative scenario is considerably worse than the possible agreement the parties could reach. Hence, the incentives and determination to participate in a negotiation are greater. The BATNA principle presupposes that a negotiation process should not be initiated if the possible outcome is worse than the parties' current conditions, as the incentive and determination to negotiate is to produce a better result than what would be obtained if no negotiation took place.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution literature has focused on why peace negotiations start and develop the way they do. The complexity the parties face in these processes and how they navigate such uncertainty will be key to understanding the efforts they devote to the process and the chances of reaching an agreement. The following section uses this framework to study the current Colombian *Total Peace* policy.

3 Total Peace Case Study

After four years of negotiations between 2012 and 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC reached a historic peace agreement aimed at ending the longest-running guerrilla war in the Western Hemisphere. Under the agreement, 13,609 FARC combatants laid down 8,894 weapons, and the government committed to essential structural reforms, including rural and political reforms, to address the conflict's root causes (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Isacson, 2021). However, after seven years of the agreement, only 32% had been fully implemented (Echavarría et al., 2024; O'Brien, 2024). Meanwhile, historic guerrilla groups like the ELN, which attempted negotiations with the government in 2017, along with dissident factions that did not comply with the 2016 agreement and emerging criminal organizations such as the Clan del Golfo, have rapidly expanded across the territory. This expansion is primarily due to their ties with drug cartels and the State's insufficient presence in critical areas (Arias & Prieto, 2024; Isacson, 2021; FIP, 2024).

This context gave rise to the *Total Peace* policy in Colombia in 2022 under President Gustavo Petro's administration (2022–2026). *Total Peace* allows the government to negotiate with outlawed organized armed groups while continuing to implement the 2016 peace agreement (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2022). This policy aims to create conditions to de-escalate the armed conflict, ensure victims' rights to truth, justice, and reparation, and facilitate the disarmament of all armed groups present in Colombia (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2022; Preciado et al., 2023).

The purpose of the policy is “to achieve a “stable and lasting peace, with guarantees of non-repetition and security for all Colombians” (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2022) and ensure the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. For that, this policy incorporated institutional changes¹ and facilitated two tracks: *Political Negotiations* and *Submission to Justice Dialogues* involving nine distinct actors, including guerrilla groups, dissidents, and national and urban criminal gangs (La Silla Vacía, 2024). Former High Commissioner for Peace under President Petro, Danilo Rueda, described this as an “unprecedented and ambitious process,” highlighting the unique challenge of “integrating such diverse armed groups, each with distinct natures and motivations, into Colombia's peacebuilding efforts” (Castillo, 2023).

President Petro acknowledged that making the Total Peace policy viable “became a more complex process” than initially thought (Suesca, 2024). This section focuses on four main areas in the context of the *Total Peace policy*: 1) the multiplicity and diversity of actors, 2) the interdependences between them, 3) the negotiation guiding principles, and 4) the available negotiation alternatives. Analyzing these elements allows for reflections and contributions to the peacemaking field, primarily focusing on the importance of negotiation process design, policy articulation, and strategic negotiation planning to manage the inherent complexity of multi-actor peace processes effectively.

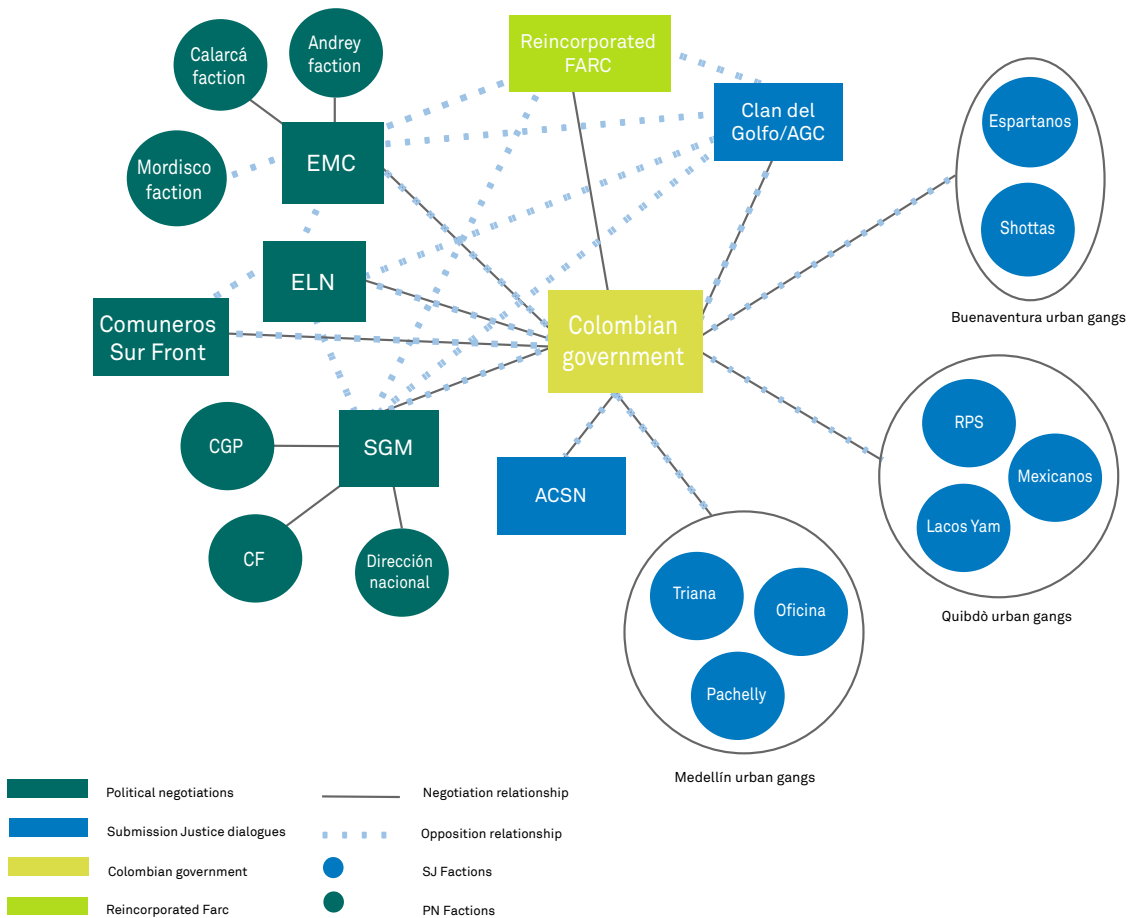
¹ The “Total Peace” policy transferred the responsibilities of the Office of the High Counselor for Stabilization, which had direct communication with the president, to the Final Peace Agreement Implementation Unit under the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2022).

3.1. MULTIPLE AND DIVERSE ACTORS

As mentioned, the *Total Peace* policy contemplates nine separate negotiations across two distinct tracks. One track involved *Political Negotiations* (dark green in Figure 1) with groups outside the law recognized for their political motivations and/or political origins. This category includes the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), which is in its seventh peace negotiation attempt since its foundation in 1964 (Pizarro, 2017), the Comuneros Sur Front, an ELN faction, and FARC dissident groups that did not comply with the 2016 agreement, namely the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and the Segunda Marquetalia (SGM).

The other track consists of *Submission to Justice Dialogues* (blue in Figure 1) involving "high-impact" criminal groups (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2022). This category encompasses the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), also known as the Clan del Golfo; the Autodefensas Conquistadores de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (ACSN), and the Medellín, Buenaventura, and the Quibdó urban gangs, each negotiating separately with the Colombian government (La Silla Vacía, 2024). Some of these actors have a localized activity in some cities, municipalities, or regions.

Total Peace Negotiation Map:



Source: Daniel Medina

Nevertheless, the categorization between political and non-political groups remained an open debate in the government's first two years, contributing to the negotiation's complexity. This occurred since there was insufficient precision regarding the criteria that would classify the group's nature and determine the type of negotiation to which they should be subjected. This has created numerous debates inside and outside the negotiating tables. For instance, the self-named AGC, or Clan del Golfo, pressed to be recognized as a politically motivated armed group rather than a criminal actor (Torrado, 2024). However, experts assert that "the Clan del Golfo does not have a counterinsurgent nature, sustained ties with the State, nor does it defend a model of society," hence it is characterized as "an organized crime structure with connections to international drug trafficking cartels, and money laundering (...) in addition to its military structure" (Arias & Prieto, 2024). This debate over the groups' categorization was fostered by former High Commissioner for Peace, Sergio Jaramillo², who argued before the Constitutional Court in 2023 that the only two groups that should be categorized as "political" within the Total Peace policy are the ELN and the already reincorporated FARC. Historically, both groups have been adversaries of the Colombian State, and their illegal activities are recognized as aimed at "supporting a military effort to seize power" (El Tiempo, 2023). Regarding the EMC and the SGM, the former High Commissioner asserted that these are groups without a "political logic" but rather a criminal one (El Tiempo, 2023).

The composition of a process with simultaneous negotiations, combined with debates inside and outside the negotiation tables regarding the parties' nature, reveals the complex scenario of Total Peace. The decision to negotiate with nine dissimilar armed groups, categorized by unclear criteria, increased the peace policy's challenges for reaching an agreement, affecting the parties' readiness to negotiate. This complexity is evident two years after the policy began, as only the government-ELN and government-SGM negotiations have reached agreements on their negotiation agendas' structure (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, 2023; Torrado, 2024). The other six peace talks remain in an exploratory phase, filled with constant crises and lacking clear negotiation routes (La Silla Vacía, 2024).

3.2. INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN ACTORS

Total Peace was framed as a multiparty negotiation. However, it has become increasingly evident throughout the process that independent actors are not only negotiating in parallel, but these actors are also internally divided and have non-monolithic structures. This has contributed to complexity and affected internal dynamics, particularly with the ELN, the EMC, the SGM, and the urban gangs.

From 2022 to July 2024, negotiations with the ELN repeatedly faced crises due to the government's decision to initiate separate regional dialogues with the Comuneros Sur front, a subunit of this organization operating in the south of the country. This front asserted its independence from the ELN Central Command (COCE), prompting warnings from COCE that they would withdraw from talks unless the government suspended direct dialogue with this faction (Rodríguez, 2024). Meanwhile, the EMC

² Sergio Jaramillo is often called the architect of the 2016 peace process. As the High Commissioner for Peace, he led the exploratory negotiations with the FARC guerrillas, which culminated in the signing of the negotiation agenda in 2012. Alongside former Colombian Vice President Humberto de la Calle, he then led the public negotiations that resulted in the Teatro Colón Agreement in 2016. As Peace Commissioner, he also oversaw the FARC's disarmament in 2017.

³ The EMC divided in factions. Two led by alias Calarcá and Andrey, who continue negotiating with the government, and a third faction led by alias Iván Mordisco, considered the group's top leader but excluded from talks for refusing to sign a ceasefire protocol (Parra, 2024).

fragmented into three distinct factions: two continue negotiating with the government, while the third, led by the most prominent leader, has been excluded from the talks³ (Parra, 2024).

Moreover, the SGM, a FARC dissident group, is also composed of three different sub-groups, one of which is led by the alias Iván Márquez, who was the FARC's chief negotiator during the 2016 Havana Peace Process (Garzón et al., 2021)⁴. Finally, the talks between the Buenaventura, Quibdó, and Medellín urban gangs comprised delegates from different groups or "combos" that negotiate as a block in three different tables⁵ (La Silla Vacía, 2024).

While the government attempted to conduct negotiations separately with the nine groups, they increasingly engaged in armed confrontations in Colombia's rural areas, fostering their competitive interdependence. According to FIP (2024), the government's actions in terms of security and dialogue "[did] not have positive effects" in de-escalating the confrontations between the EMC, the Clan del Golfo, and the ELN⁶. Furthermore, the ELN and the EMC formed military alliances in the north of Colombia to counter the Clan del Golfo's expansion⁷ (Reynoso, 2023; Preciado et al., 2023), and the different SGM factions maintained confrontations with the EMC in the Southwestern region of Colombia⁸ (Garzón, et al., 2021). Additionally, it should be noted that the demobilized FARC remains a significant actor within the context of the Total Peace policy. Unfortunately, from 2016 to 2024, 412 ex-combatants who signed the peace agreement were assassinated (Avendaño, 2024), presumably mainly by FARC dissident groups and the Clan del Golfo (Torres, 2021). Figure 1 above illustrates each party's relationships and interdependence.

The conflict among the *Total Peace* parties significantly impacted the negotiations during the first two years. For instance, the Clan del Golfo repeatedly rejected the government's invitations to negotiate under the *Submission to Justice* track. They argued that the government recognized their territorial rivals, such as the ELN and EMC, as political actors while categorizing them as a "high-impact" criminal group (Torrado, 2024). This disparity in recognition was a point of contention affecting Clan del Golfo's readiness to participate in the peace process.

Furthermore, within this competitive interdependent system, the government faced the additional challenge of coordinating multiple negotiations and maintaining coherence within the same range of negotiation with each party separately⁹. This entails ensuring consistent rules and agreements across the negotiation tables. This challenge became more complex with the necessity to uphold the 2016 agreement within the same framework, as ex-combatants who signed the agreement may have resisted being subjected to terms perceived as less favorable than those negotiated under *Total Peace*.

5 The EMC divided in factions. Two led by alias Calarcá and Andrey, who continue negotiating with the government, and a third faction led by alias Iván Mordisco, considered the group's top leader but excluded from talks for refusing to sign a ceasefire protocol (Parra, 2024).

6 The SGM is internally divided into the Coordinadora Guerrillera del Pacífico (the largest faction by combatant numbers), the Comandos de la Frontera – Ejército Bolivariano (CDF-EB), and the Dirección Nacional de la Segunda Marquetalia, led by Iván Márquez.

7 The Buenaventura urban gangs table included representatives from Los Espartanos and Los Shottas; the Medellín urban gangs negotiation involved Los Pachelly, La Oficina, and Los Triana, and the Quibdó urban gangs consisted of Los Yam, Los Mexicanos, and the RPS-Cartel del Norte (Preciado et al., 2023).

8 Particularly in the Colombian departments of Arauca, Cauca, southern Chocó, and Buenaventura (Reynoso, 2023; Preciado et al., 2023).

9 Alliances between the ELN and the EMC have formed in the southern part of the Bolívar department (Reynoso, 2023; Preciado et al., 2023).

10 Confrontations between the SGM and the EMC have occurred in the departments of Cauca, Nariño, and Caquetá (Garzón et al., 2021).

In conclusion, understanding the interdependence between the negotiation parties and the factions within them is crucial for assessing the complexity of *Total Peace*. The Colombian peace policy can be framed as a negative-competitive interdependent system with fragmented actors and greater uncertainty, affecting the parties' readiness and requiring more effort from them to articulate the multiple decision-making processes, find consensus, and make concessions among all the actors involved.

3.3. THE NEGOTIATION GUIDING PRINCIPLE

The 2016 Havana peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC was inspired by the Good Friday Agreement¹¹, which established the principle *Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed*. This principle stated that only partial agreement would take effect once all aspects of the negotiations were finalized (IFIT, 2018). Contrary to the 2016 Havana peace process, *Total Peace* followed a different principle, similar to *Implementing while negotiating*. In two years of negotiation, President Petro's government has decreed bilateral ceasefires with the ELN, the EMC, the Clan del Golfo, the ACSN, the SGM, and urban gangs (La Silla Vacía, 2024). Additionally, it has initiated efforts around demining and the search for disappeared people with the Comuneros Sur Front (Patiño, 2024).

The *Implementing while Negotiating* strategy may have been developed to address potential doubts about the State's capacity to honor agreements. As ELN commander Antonio García highlighted in 2017, peace negotiations should not merely be postponed dialogues where combatants disarm while the government merely makes promises (García, 2022). This skepticism towards the *Total Peace* policy is also rooted in the stagnated implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. As mentioned above, by 2023, the government had fully implemented less than 40% of the agreement (Echavarría et al., 2024; O'Brien, 2024). This situation gained significance in July 2024, when, after two years in power, President Petro paradoxically accused the Colombian State before the United Nations of failing to implement the 2016 peace agreement while proposing to extend its implementation by seven more years. He argued that not fulfilling these commitments undermines the credibility of the Colombian State in its peacebuilding efforts (Torrado, 2024; Triana, 2024; Naciones Unidas, 2024).

However, contrary to its intended outcomes, the *Implementing while Negotiating* approach may have inadvertently complicated the negotiation process. The underlying principle of *Total Peace* structures the negotiations to progressively address the agreement's implementation rather than postponing it until after the talks conclude. This approach increases uncertainty among the parties involved by continually impacting their trust in the capabilities and intentions of all actors to fulfill the reached agreements. For instance, FIP (2023) argues that ceasefires during exploratory phases raised significant concerns about the timing of these ceasefires, the parties' commitment to them, and the absence of clear protocols and verification mechanisms (Tobo, 2023). Moreover, *Implementing while Negotiating* creates a loop where the talks depend on the agreement's compliance levels, while the implementation is subject to the political climate and changing positions at the table. As the literature argues, implementing an agreement is inherently complex (Molloy, 2018), not only because it can take decades (Stedman, 2001) but also because it is a non-linear

11 The Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, was signed on April 10, 1998, between the UK and Irish governments and the parties in Northern Ireland, following three decades of conflict known as the Troubles. The Agreement established a new power-sharing arrangement in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Office, 1998).

process requiring constant negotiation, renegotiation, evaluation, and reevaluation (Rettberg & Dupont, 2022). Therefore, the principle followed by *Total Peace* led to a complex paradox, particularly for monitoring and verification mechanisms. Concrete indicators had to demonstrate the level of the agreement’s implementation. Nevertheless, these indicators also had to be flexible enough to adapt to the political reality and the malleable nature of the conversations (Molloy, 2018).

Overall, the implicit principle of *Implementing while Negotiating* was introduced to mitigate uncertainties regarding the parties' ability to implement a potential peace agreement, especially given the stagnation in implementing the 2016 peace accord (Echavarría et al., 2024; Avendaño, 2024). However, this principle has increased complexity by introducing greater ambiguity and undermining trust in the process and between the parties. Discussions hinge on compliance levels, while the political dynamics of the negotiations shape implementation.

3.4. AVAILABLE NEGOTIATION ALTERNATIVES

To understand the real incentives that *Total Peace* parties had between 2022 and July 2024, it is essential to analyze each of the ten actors' BATNAs (nine armed groups plus the government). By examining their alternative to a negotiated agreement, it will be possible to identify and review the parties’ relative strength, readiness to engage in negotiation, and willingness and likelihood to reach a sustainable, agreeable solution.

ACTOR	BATNA
ELN	<p>Continue the war with greater strength. If an agreement is not reached, the ELN will continue its guerrilla war, but this time, it will be stronger and have a greater territorial presence. It is estimated that the ELN increased its strength by 5.3% compared to 2022. Furthermore, it has expanded its presence and influence, growing from 176 municipalities in 2022 to 184 in 2023 (Preciado et al., 2023).</p>
Comuneros Sur Front	<p>Continue the war with greater legitimacy. With around 100 combatants (Patiño, 2024), the Comuneros Sur Front can gain greater legitimacy if negotiations fail, as it is already recognized as an independent dissident group from the ELN and a direct interlocutor with the government.</p>

<p>EMC</p>	<p>Continue the war with greater strength and legitimacy. If the EMC fails to reach an agreement, it will continue in war, but this time as one of the strongest armed actors in the territory. The EMC grew by 9% compared to 2022. Additionally, its presence expanded from 117 municipalities in 2022 to 173 in 2023, where it exercises governance in 77 of them (Preciado et al., 2023). Despite criticisms of being characterized as FARC dissidents, the EMC was recognized as a valid interlocutor by the government.</p>
<p>Segunda Marquetalia</p>	<p>Continue the war with greater strength and legitimacy. If Segunda Marquetalia fails to reach an agreement, it will continue in war with a moderate but increasing presence. This group has shown the least growth over the past two years, expanding from 12 units in 2021 to 15 in 2023 (Preciado et al., 2023). However, despite being a dissident group that did not comply with the 2016 agreement, the government recognized this group as a political actor in arms.</p>
<p>Clan del Golfo / AGC</p>	<p>Continue the war with greater strength. If the Clan del Golfo cannot reach an agreement, they will continue the war, positioning themselves as the strongest armed group in the territory. The Clan del Golfo increased its strength by 23% from 2022 to 2023, making it the fastest-growing group with the most influence, being present in 208 municipalities (Preciado et al., 2023). Today, the Clan del Golfo seeks recognition as a political group in arms, which would strengthen their BATNA if achieved.</p>
<p>Medellín Urban Gangs</p>	<p>Continue the war with greater legitimacy. If Medellín gangs fail to reach an agreement with the government, they will continue to be a criminal group, this time with greater legitimacy, having been recognized as valid interlocutors by the government. This recognition has sparked controversy as the scope of the negotiations remains unclear. The criminal gangs in Medellín, which include Los Pachelly, La Oficina, and Los Triana, have approximately 12,000 members (Preciado et al., 2023) and have some degree of control over the 16 “comunas” or districts of Medellín (La Silla Vacía, 2024).</p>

<p>Quibdó Urban Gangs</p>	<p>Continue the war with greater legitimacy. If the urban gangs in Quibdó fail to reach an agreement, they will continue being immersed in criminality, this time with greater legitimacy, having been recognized as valid interlocutors by the government. Today, these gangs have 500 members and consist of Los Mexicanos, Los Locos Yam, and RPS-Cartel del Norte (Preciado et al., 2023), with a particular presence in the extreme northern and southern neighborhoods of Quibdó (La Silla Vacía).</p>
<p>Buenaventura Urban Gangs</p>	<p>Continue the war with greater legitimacy. If the negotiations fail to reach an agreement, the urban gangs in Buenaventura will continue being a criminal group. Like the gangs in Quibdó and Medellín, they will do so with greater legitimacy, having been recognized as interlocutors by the government. Today, gangs in Buenaventura have 1,700 members and are composed of Los Shottas and Los Espartanos (Preciado et al., 2023), which have a presence in the San Juan XXIII, San Luis, and Bellavista neighborhoods (La Silla Vacía, 2024).</p>
<p>Colombian National government</p>	<p>Continue a more escalated and intense war. If the Colombian government fails to reach an agreement with the armed groups involved in the Total Peace process, it will have to continue confronting the armed conflict and criminality. However, due to the expansion and growth of these groups, this conflict will be more escalated and intense.</p>

Based on the previous analysis of the Total Peace policy, the ELN has increased its presence from 176 municipalities in 2022 to 184 in 2023, marking a 5.3% growth. The Comuneros Sur Front, now recognized as a dissident group of the ELN, has become a direct interlocutor with the government despite having around 100 combatants. Similarly, the EMC has gained legitimacy and expanded by 9%, now influencing 173 municipalities and governing 77. Meanwhile, the SGM, although showing modest growth from 12 to 15 units over the past two years, has been recognized by the government as a political actor in arms despite not complying with the 2016 peace agreement. On the other hand, the Clan del Golfo, or AGC, is the fastest-growing group, with a 23% increase in strength and presence in 208 municipalities, seeking political recognition (Preciado et al., 2023).

Urban gangs in Medellín, Quibdó, and Buenaventura also have significant stakes in the process. Medellín's gangs collectively have about 12,000 members. In Quibdó, there are around 500 gang members, while in Buenaventura, there are 1,700. All have been acknowledged as valid negotiation parties by the government, which has added to their legitimacy (Preciado et al., 2023). In contrast to these groups, the Colombian National government faces the challenge of confronting a potentially more intense armed conflict if agreements are not reached, given the expansion and empowerment of these groups.

Colombia's current landscape of the *Total Peace* process involves multiple armed groups, each with a similar BATNA. These groups have consolidated their legitimacy as direct negotiation actors to the government, solidified their presence, and expanded territorial control during negotiations (Preciado et al., 2023). In contrast, the government's BATNA has weakened as the conflict has escalated. If talks fail by the end of President Petro's administration, the government will face stronger groups with more significant territorial presence. According to FIP (2024), between 2022 and 2023, there was a 32% increase in actions against the military, a 27% increase in actions against infrastructure and property, and a 54% increase in confrontations between armed groups across almost all departments of the country (Preciado et al., 2023).

These negotiations still risk falling into the *False Negotiation category* (Glozman et al., 2014), as the level of uncertainty about the groups' motivations is still very high. *Total Peace* might be working as a strategic calculation for the groups involved to strengthen their military capacities and continue the armed conflict from a more advantageous position (Fisas, 2010). The strong BATNAs of the armed groups result in low incentives and determination to negotiate in good faith and reach an agreement. The prospects for *Total Peace* by the end of President Petro's administration in 2026 may not be suitable enough, as the parties' confidence in their ability to win the war remains high and is rising. Moreover, as the intentions surrounding the prospects of resolution remain low, the uncertainty of the parties' readiness could increase, thereby decreasing the likelihood of resolution.

4 Contributions to the peacemaking field

The Total Peace policy offers valuable lessons and significant contributions to the Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacemaking fields. By analyzing these intrinsically interdependent processes, scholars and practitioners can gain insights and develop effective strategies for addressing such scenarios' inherent complexity and uncertainty. *Total Peace* highlights the importance of negotiation process design, policy articulation, and alternatives to negotiation as frameworks for examining, intervening in, and developing future peace processes globally.

4.1. NEGOTIATION PROCESS DESIGN

The Total Peace policy set a maximalist goal of achieving stable and lasting peace for all Colombians. To that end, the Colombian government designed a process involving nine parallel negotiations but without clear principles, structures, and agendas. The way *Total Peace* developed in the first two years resembles former Foreign Minister Álvaro Leyva's argument that *Total Peace* was conceived more like a jazz improvisation than a classical music score (Restrepo, 2022). This improvisational approach added complexity to the process, making it more challenging and less realistic in the medium and long term.

Total Peace demonstrates the importance of process design by carefully deciding who and when to involve new parties in the process, as managing multiple parallel negotiations becomes inherently more challenging. One possibility is to begin with confidential exploratory phases before public negotiations, allowing parties to evaluate their genuine willingness, motivations, and optimism for engaging in the peace process. This approach facilitates a realistic setting of formal negotiation agendas and pathways without inflating the expectations of parties and the public. As Ury (2024) emphasizes, maintaining high aspirations while keeping low expectations is crucial in any negotiation.

Moreover, process design helps establish precise criteria for defining the nature of the parties involved and the type of negotiations they will undergo. Clear definitions within peace talk frameworks enable mitigating the intersubjectivity surrounding the identity and nature of the negotiating groups while setting the Zone of Possible Agreement with clear objectives and redlines, effectively managing intrinsic complexity and uncertainty. Scholars can offer valuable insights into the nature of the groups, leveraging historical precedents and current realities to guide the negotiation framework.

Finally, the *Total Peace* case study reaffirms the importance of defining clear negotiation principles early in the peace process. Principles such as *Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed* or *Implementing while negotiating* are crucial for managing complexity and uncertainty in multiparty peace talks. These negotiation principles form the bedrock of the peace process design, guiding and influencing the structure of the agenda, the negotiation sequence, and the implementation of agreements. Additionally, they aid in developing Confidence-Building measures (CBMs) and monitoring and verification processes.

4.2. POLICY ARTICULATION

The *Total Peace* policy sought during its first two years to address not only ongoing negotiations with active armed groups but also to fully implement the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC. This dual focus highlights the interdependence between these efforts. For the Colombian government to effectively advance negotiations and reach resolutions with all involved parties in this peace process, it must demonstrate a genuine commitment to the social reforms outlined in the 2016 accord. This commitment is crucial for signaling to negotiating parties that the government is both willing and capable of honoring future agreements within the *Total Peace* framework. By prioritizing the implementation of past accords, the government can build the credibility and trust necessary for successful negotiations and enduring peace in the remaining time.

The Total Peace policy illustrates the repercussions of neglecting the implementation of previous agreements and essential public policies. When past accords are not fully executed, and critical social policies aimed at de-escalating conflict are underdeveloped, it fosters skepticism and resistance among the public and negotiating parties. Moreover, insufficient attention to security measures and guarantees for victims and ex-combatants further exacerbates these issues.

To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to focus on the thorough implementation of previous peace agreements in tandem with the development of comprehensive social policies. This approach reassures stakeholders of the government's commitment, strengthens its negotiating position, and sets a positive precedent for future negotiation efforts. By demonstrating a genuine commitment to addressing past accords and investing in long-term social stability, governments can create a conducive environment for peace.

4.3. ALTERNATIVES TO NEGOTIATION

The Total Peace policy might inadvertently strengthen the outside options of armed groups, risking a false negotiation in which these groups use the process to bolster their military capabilities and expand territorial control. This could result in both the government and the groups losing the opportunity to build a constructive working relationship through the negotiations. Colombia's long history of peace processes¹² underscores the importance of carefully evaluating the parties' BATNAs when entering negotiations.

Parties should engage in negotiations if the peace process can strengthen their current position or create the conditions for achieving that. Therefore, the government must assess whether the other parties' alternatives to an agreement are sufficiently weak to incentivize negotiation and critically examine its outside options. This ensures that if negotiations fail, the government and the country, in general, will not be in a worse position than they would have been without engaging in the process.

Evaluating each party's alternatives to negotiation or *BATNA* is crucial in negotiation and conflict resolution. This process involves identifying actions that incentivize the parties to the negotiation vis-à-vis their outside options. Traditionally, this process involves identifying actions to weaken the other's alternatives and create conditions

12 From 1984 to 2024, a total of 17 peace processes have been conducted in Colombia. Only six of them have ended in a agreement between the parties (Pizarro, 2017)

conducive to negotiation, often through military calculations and escalating actions. The goal is to reach a deadlock where dialogue and negotiation become the only viable options. However, alternative strategies exist to achieve this mutual stalemate, offering more nuanced and potentially less destructive paths to peace.

Economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian actions can incentivize the parties to adopt a more decisive approach towards a negotiated solution. For example, humanitarian actions, social policy implementation, and support for grassroots peace movements can stabilize regions and create goodwill. Engaging third parties and impartial mediators can also facilitate dialogue and build trust between conflicting parties. By combining these strategies, among others, negotiators can weaken each party's BATNA, encouraging them to pursue peaceful negotiations as the most viable solution.

5 Conclusion

The study of variables related to peace processes' engagement, development, and outcomes is well-explored within Negotiation and Conflict Resolution literature. This body of work emphasizes the inherent complexity of multi-actor peace processes, highlighting their systemic nature and the multifaceted interactions and interdependencies among actors, factors, and dynamics. Such complexities influence the parties' readiness to negotiate, which is invariably shaped by the inherent uncertainties in the negotiation process.

Through this theoretical lens, the Colombian Total Peace policy analysis underscores the profound complexity of the country's peace process between 2022 and July 2024. This complexity is rooted in the uncertainty generated by the involvement of multiple actors and factors, their interdependencies, the design of the negotiation principles, and the alternatives available to the parties. These elements collectively suggest that reaching a viable agreement in President Gustavo Petro's remaining time in government is a daunting challenge, potentially constraining efforts to de-escalate the Colombian conflict.

Nevertheless, despite the slim prospects for conflict transformation, Total Peace has made significant contributions to the Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacemaking fields. It offers critical insights and lessons learned for current and future peace processes globally. Specifically, the Colombian Total Peace policy highlights the importance of thoughtful process design, coherent policy articulation, and rigorous evaluation of negotiation alternatives. This paper advances the understanding of peace processes as a growing field by exploring their complexity and dynamic nature, providing a valuable framework for future research and practice.

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