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Abstracts

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President Juan Manuel Santos took over from Álvaro Uribe after the election in August 2010. President Santos is expected to capitalise on the advances in domestic security made by Uribe in his fight against drug traffickers and insurgency groups – especially the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

On September 22 2010, government forces killed FARC's senior military commander, Víctor Julio Suárez. President Santos said it was the 'most resounding blow against the FARC in its entire history', and was the 'beginning of the end' of the guerrillas. On November 15 2010, the army attacked a FARC compound in Nariño, leaving 14 dead.

However, Colombia still has to contend with many other new illegal armed groups and other criminal groups. A broad political and social coalition will be required to back President Santos in any major agenda for conflict resolution.

We expect diplomatic relations between Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela to continue improving throughout 2011, as President Santos adopts a more constructive political stance towards the Andean region. In November 2010, President Santos and Venezuelan President Chávez agreed on closer cooperation in their fight against drug-trafficking, as well as strengthening economic ties between the two countries.

Some tensions are likely to remain due to Santos's escalating assault against FARC. Moreover, we cannot rule out a sudden deterioration in relations, particularly if domestic political conditions in Venezuela and Ecuador suffer from the distortive economic policies pursued by their respective governments. Colombia has a vast income disparity – it is ranked as the sixth most unequal country in the world, topping the list for Latin America, according to the United Nations Development Programme. Given rapid

economic growth and rising per capita income, the pressure for the authorities to step up social spending programmes and ensure a broader spread of wealth within the economy is likely to mount. That said, in light of the current administration's plans to post a balanced budget by 2014, such efforts may take a back seat in politics over the medium term, potentially raising the risk of disenchantment among the lower socio-economic strata of the electorate. Moreover, income inequality in Colombia is very much a symptom of an unequal distribution of land, as approximately 0.4% of landowners own 61% of rural land. Therefore, the structural nature of this political challenge offers no easy solution for any government, and we would not be surprised to see this problem drag on for a number of decades. Colombia's indigenous defence suppliers are unimportant in a global context. Nevertheless, they should benefit from the continuing growth of the economy and a steady increase in defence spending as a percentage of GDP.

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