

A New Turn in Colombia-Venezuela Relations

By Gregory Wilpert

IN THE LATEST VICTORY FOR MULTILATERAL diplomacy in Latin America, Colombia and Venezuela reestablished diplomatic relations August 11 after a tense three-week standoff. In July Colombian officials accused the Venezuelan government of harboring “terrorist” insurgents at an extraordinary meeting of the Organization of American States, where they showed copious videos and photos of Colombian guerrillas operating in unidentifiable jungles. This “evidence” purportedly demonstrated that Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has granted them safe harbor. Chávez immediately responded by suspending diplomatic relations with Colombia, rejecting Colombia’s call for an international investigation, and condemning the Uribe government’s “aggression” and “defamation campaign.” Just as quickly, the U.S. State Department expressed its support for Colombia’s position.

Outgoing Colombian president Álvaro Uribe appeared to be making a last-ditch effort to influence the foreign policy of his successor, Juan Manuel Santos, who took office August 7. Colombian news media were rife in July with speculation that a rupture had occurred between Santos and Uribe over the Venezuela question. Indeed, Uribe’s accusations against Chávez were at odds with one of Santos’s key campaign promises: negotiating the reinstatement of full Venezuelan trade relations, which were reduced in August 2009 by the Chávez government in protest of Uribe’s decision to grant the United States access to seven military bases in Colombian territory.

Restoring full trade with Venezuela was no small matter for Colombia, which sells about six times as much to Venezuela as vice versa. Exports to Venezuela will bring in only \$1.2 billion in 2010, compared with \$4 billion in 2009 and more than \$6 billion in 2008, according to estimates from Colombia’s central bank. In the past when relations soured, Chávez and Uribe always managed to patch things up because both recognized how mutually dependent their country’s economies have become; between 1998 and 2008, annual trade tripled, from \$2.4 billion to \$7.2 billion.

Striking a conciliatory posture, Santos invited Chávez to Santa Marta, Colombia, where the two

presidents publicly announced the rapprochement. This followed on diplomatic efforts by UNASUR, the South American multilateral organization—led by former Argentine president Néstor Kirchner, who has played a role in calming regional tensions in the past. In doing so, the South American leaders sidestepped the U.S.-dominated OAS, where the United States was alone in endorsing Colombia’s accusations. As a part of the agreement, five bilateral commissions will be created to administer relations between the countries, including one that will review trade relations and any debt Venezuela may owe to Colombian exporters.

Chávez had held open the possibility of reconciling with the Santos administration, even sending Santos a congratulatory note after he was elected. But Chávez and his foreign ministry made clear that they remain steadfast in their desire for Colombia to annul its military base agreement with the United States, which is widely perceived as a destabilizing force on the continent. That, however, is quite unlikely. After all, as Uribe’s minister of defense, Santos spearheaded Colombia’s aggressive military policies, including the 2008 bombing of a FARC camp in Ecuadoran territory.

The larger problem, however, is that neither country’s military can control the border, which stretches for 1,200 miles through often rugged, jungle-like terrain. As OAS secretary-general José Miguel Insulza pointed out to Uribe, neither country can control its side of the border. In fact, the Colombian military, paramilitary forces, and guerrillas have all made incursions into Venezuelan territory over the course of the 60-year Colombian conflict, and this will likely continue.

Ultimately, the only solution to problems in Colombia-Venezuela relations is a peaceful, permanent end to the Colombian conflict. The administration of President Obama has done nothing to encourage such a solution; rather, it has continued the Bush administration’s policy of escalating the conflict—giving Colombia ever more military support and, at the same time, reflexively taking its side against Venezuela. As long as Colombia and the United States pursue military solutions to Colombia’s problems, the whole region will remain a geopolitical powder keg. ■

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