

Making Sense of Colombia-Venezuela Relations

By Gregory Wilpert

FOR ANYONE FOLLOWING VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA relations, developments over the past few months have caused some significant head scratching. First, after the prominent breakdown in relations between the two countries towards the end of the Álvaro Uribe presidency (2002–2010), Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and Colombia's newly elected president, Juan Manuel Santos, engineered a complete turnaround when they announced both the normalization of diplomatic relations and a renewal of trade last August. Since then, Chávez and Santos have grown ever closer, despite the fact that the two presidents come from opposite ends of the political spectrum. As we might expect, this has led to unease in each of their political camps. Everyone seems to be wondering: Why this sudden closeness?

In one of the first signs of improving relations, Santos announced in October that he would comply with the Colombian Supreme Court's decision that prohibited the United States' use of seven of its military bases as per a previously signed U.S.-Colombia cooperation agreement. This came much to the chagrin of the United States, which had planned to establish a robust military presence in Colombia, its stalwart ally in the region. Chávez responded to this announcement by saying, "The majority of the peoples of the region should breathe a sigh of relief. Rationality, common sense, and responsibility have prevailed."

Then, in November, Venezuela extradited three people accused of belonging to Colombian guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), which the Bogotá-based daily *El Tiempo* described as "one of the most significant gestures made in the new phase of bilateral relations."

A summit meeting in April further confounded observers when Chávez, following a

meeting with Santos, met with the conservative president of Honduras, Porfirio Lobo, whose government Chávez and many other Latin American leaders refused to recognize because they viewed it as a successor to the regime instituted after the 2009 coup. Urged by Santos, Chávez agreed to help mediate between ousted Honduran president Manuel Zelaya and Lobo, so that Honduras might rejoin the Organization of American States. The mediation effort has so far been successful, leading to the fulfillment of one of Zelaya's main demands—that all charges against him be dropped—and his return to the country in May.

This rather unexpected turn of events led to another surprise the same month, when Santos announced that Chávez had complied with his promise to get rid of all FARC camps in Venezuela. "We are satisfied that the camps that we had previously located [in Venezuela] are no longer there," Santos told Spanish television during a tour of European countries. This announcement upset former president Uribe, who continues to insist that Venezuela is aiding the FARC.

The prize for upsetting his own camp, however, went to Chávez in April, when he ordered the arrest of Joaquín Pérez Becerra, a journalist for the New Colombia News Agency (ANNCOL), a Stockholm-based alternative news website about Colombia whose critics view it as sympathetic to the FARC. The arrest took place upon the request of Santos, who claimed that Pérez Becerra is a leading member of the FARC. As it turns out, though, Pérez Becerra is a recognized political refugee in Sweden who had acquired Swedish citizenship in 2000. He fled Colombia in 1993 following the murder of his wife and receiving death threats for being a member of the Unión Patriótica, a socialist political party founded by the FARC during its negotiations with the Colombian government in the 1980s.

Gregory Wilpert is Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College and author of Changing Venezuela by Taking Power (Verso, 2007). He is a member of the NACLA editorial committee.

TAKING NOTE

Subsequent protests among Chávez supporters forced Chávez to justify the action by saying that he was acting upon an Interpol “red alert” and that if Venezuela expects other countries to detain people wanted in Venezuela, then he had to respond to the red alerts of other countries.

It is certainly true that Chávez was being consistent with his demand to adhere to Interpol “red alerts” and that opponents to Chávez have dangerously abused the FARC issue so as to portray Venezuela as a terrorist-supporting rogue state, which can be used as an excuse for foreign intervention in Venezuela. However, the manner in which Pérez Becerra was deported did not appear to comply with basic legal procedures. In short, Pérez Becerra appears to have been a victim of the new Chávez-Santos friendship.

Pérez Becerra’s victimization contrasts with the case of Walid Makled, wanted by both Venezuela and the United States for drug trafficking. Colombian authorities arrested him in 2010 and, again in the name of improving Venezuela-Colombia relations, agreed to extradite him to Venezuela, not the United States. But unlike Venezuela in the Pérez Becerra case, Colombia demanded assurances that Makled would receive a fair trial and would be treated humanely.

There are at least two main reasons that Venezuela and Colombia have been improving relations so dramatically in the past year. The first is eco-

conomic. Before relations between the two countries began to sour (again), following Colombia’s signing of the military cooperation agreement with the United States, trade had reached an all-time high of \$7 billion per year. In the year after the break in relations, until the election of Santos, annual trade plunged to about \$1 billion. While there is a significant trade imbalance between the two countries—Venezuela imports far more from Colombia than vice versa—both countries depend on this trade. They are close neighbors, and using alternative markets or suppliers is costly for both. The two countries also experienced an economic recession in 2009–2010, and the decline in trade made recovery even more difficult.

The second reason for the improved relations has to do with security. Both Venezuela and Colombia see the other as a security risk. Colombia has long claimed that the Chávez government aids the FARC and has used as proof of this involvement computer files that supposedly belonged to FARC commander Raúl Reyes, which Colombian commandos seized during a 2008 raid on a FARC encampment in Ecuador. There are plenty of reasons to doubt the authenticity of many of these files, not the least of which is the fact that the files were tampered with before being turned over to Colombia’s forensic investigators. The recent pronouncement of the Colombian Supreme Court that the

files may not be used as evidence in court proceedings casts further doubt on their validity. Nonetheless, despite legitimate doubts about the claims of Venezuelan involvement with the FARC, it is probably fair to assume that the Colombian government sees Venezuela as a potential threat that needs to be neutralized either by threats of force or by engagement. In contrast to Uribe, it seems that Santos has decided for the latter approach.

Similarly, the Chávez government sees Colombia as a genuine threat, partly due to the constant infiltration of irregular armed forces into Venezuela, particularly of Colombian paramilitaries. Venezuela is also suspicious of the constant accusations that it is supporting the FARC, which provide cover for undermining Chávez or perhaps even launching an attack on Venezuelan soil, as happened in Ecuador in 2008.

The Colombian-Venezuelan strategy of engagement must also be seen in the light of the ongoing efforts in the region to stake out independence vis-à-vis the United States. Confrontation between the two countries gives the United States an excuse to be more involved in Colombia and the region, something that Latin Americans continue to reject. The most recent proof of this rejection can be seen in the effort to create a new regional organization—in addition to the ones already created, such as UNASUR and ALBA—the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which is to be launched July 5 in Caracas. CELAC is clearly designed to challenge the importance of the OAS and thereby curtail U.S. influence. When seen in this context, the recent rapprochement between Colombia and Venezuela no longer seems so strange. ■

The Colombian-Venezuelan strategy of engagement is part of ongoing efforts in Latin America to stake out independence vis-à-vis the United States. Confrontation between the two countries only provides an excuse for U.S. meddling.