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## The Fragile, Back-and-forth Relationship between Venezuela and Colombia

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**Theme:** Under the governments of Álvaro Uribe and Hugo Chavez, political and diplomatic relations between Venezuela and Colombia have been increasingly fragile and back-and-forth, jeopardising ties and the precarious stability in the Andean region.

**Summary:** Political and diplomatic relations between Venezuela and Colombia under the governments of Hugo Chavez and Álvaro Uribe (2000-08) have oscillated between periods of pragmatic understanding and acute tension. The latest diplomatic clash, in early March because of an indirect factor like Colombia's military incursion into Ecuadorean territory, not only placed the countries on the border of severing relations but also on the verge of a military conflict with potential for spreading throughout the Andean region and having serious consequences for the hemisphere. In the end the crisis was defused. And now the Presidents are preparing for a summit aimed at reaffirming their friendship and commitment to a complex, important and shared agenda. However, as in other occasions, this peace is looking superficial and fragile. So over the short or long term, a new conflict is expected between the countries that once again jeopardises relations between Colombia and Venezuela and regional stability.

**Analysis:** Relations between Venezuela and Colombia underwent a substantial change in the 1990s. Ever since the countries gained independence in the 19th century and up until the late 1980s, border problems triggered serious diplomatic conflicts and overshadowed important bilateral trade. Starting in 1989 and 1990, with the signing of the Ureña Declaration and the San Pedro Alejandrino Agreement by Presidents Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela and Virgilio Barco of Colombia, a special relationship began to be built on the premise of what is known as 'degulfisation' ('*desgolfización*'). This allowed the easing of tensions over border disputes and accentuating economic, financial and cultural integration. In 1999, political and military cooperation and good relations between the two countries –although there were in fact times of tension and disagreement, especially in the border region under the Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera– had reached an unprecedented level. Colombia came to be Venezuela's top trading partner (after the US) and on Venezuelan territory peace talks and humanitarian exchanges took place between the Colombian government and rebel groups. At Colombia's request, Venezuela –along with Spain, Costa Rica and Mexico– joined a group of countries trying to facilitate the search for a political solution to the war in Colombia.

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However, since Venezuela came to be ruled by Hugo Chávez, who is committed to implementing a radically leftist plan at the national, regional and international level –so-called 21st century socialism– and at odds with the representative democracy that prevails in Colombia, the special relationship between the two countries has slipped into a gradual process of deterioration. This in turn has disrupted all the bilateral mechanisms agreed by governments in power successively from 1989 to 1999 with the goal of maintaining the countries' common agenda at an optimal and coherent level. This gave rise to a series of political conflicts and diplomatic impasses which have gradually deepened, although not enough to cause a total and definitive rupture in the bilateral relationship. The reason for this is that, despite the visible deterioration in relations, a high level of integration has prevailed between the populations and business sectors of Venezuela and Colombia, especially on economic issues.

#### *The Andrés Pastrana era*

From 1999 to 2002 the foundation was laid for the up-and-down political relationship that exists today between the governments of Venezuela and Colombia. Ties between Chávez and Pastrana got off to a good start because the former supported and worked with the latter in the negotiating process with the FARC. Days before taking over the presidency on 18 January, 1999, Chávez took part in a meeting in Havana with Pastrana and Fidel Castro that was aimed at shoring up the peace talks with the Colombian rebels. Since then, the Venezuelan leader always endorsed the concessions his Colombian counterpart made to the guerrillas (in particular the demilitarisation of an area of Colombian territory) as well as peace-making gestures. On more than one occasion, Chávez said he was prepared to act as a facilitator of negotiations with the FARC.

But differences soon emerged between Pastrana and Chávez. The main bone of contention, but not the only one, was the so-called Plan Colombia –the strategy the Colombian government employed starting in September of 2000 to fight narco-guerrillas, with a budget of US\$7.5 billion provided by the US–. There were also sporadic confrontations over Venezuela's practice of restricting the entry of Colombian products as a way of protecting its own industries.

After the events of April 2002, in which Chávez was removed from power for a few days, the government of Venezuela engaged in a clear diplomatic shift. This was characterised by a more moderate and conciliatory attitude towards Colombia and other countries with which it had clashed. The goal of this strategic change was to garner international support and find economic and political leeway to offset the fast-paced weakening of the Chavez government after the coup, even though he regained power. Thus, when Uribe began his first term in power in September of 2002, relations between Colombia and Venezuela were back on track and on good terms.

#### *2000-2007: The Back and Forth Tendency Takes Hold*

However, just as in the times of the conservative Pastrana, soon political and diplomatic conflicts returned, although this time with more severity. This was because the new Colombian President, in his dealings with his Venezuelan counterpart, opted for political ideas and paths that were more antagonistic than those of his predecessor. The main sources of discord in the past seven years have been Uribe's support for the US-led invasion of Iraq and President George Bush's strategy for fighting terrorism; the strengthening of the Plan Colombia and its effects on neighbouring countries; his defence of economic openness and the non-politicisation of the Community of Andean Nations – which Venezuela abandoned in 2006– and the repeated complaints and expressions of

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concern from the Colombian government and press over the alleged links of Chávez with rebel groups and his intervention in Colombian domestic affairs. The Venezuelan leader always rejected the neighbouring country's allegations vehemently and with aggressive language. He sidestepped the increasingly clear, permanent and active presence of Colombian rebels on Venezuelan territory, calling the charges a conspiracy made up by the Colombian oligarchy. For Chávez, it was all just biased rumours that were part of an international plot aimed at creating a false impression of what was happening in the country; a conspiracy planned by US imperialism –which he says includes the Colombian ruling classes– against the legitimate government of Venezuela.

Despite the many diplomatic impasses, over the course of these seven years relations between the two countries not only survived, even with large periods of good political ties, but also saw substantial rise in bilateral trade, which totalled US\$6 billion in late 2007. This was possible due to the degree of mutual integration and dependence –especially in economic terms– that exists between Colombians and Venezuelans, which share one of the continent's longest and busiest borders. But this pragmatic understanding had much to do with Uribe's policy of avoiding to the extent he could any confrontation with Chávez and encouraging opportunities for dialogue and mutual collaboration, both on bilateral issues and ones at the multilateral and hemispheric levels. This explains why, for instance, in August 2007 he showed confidence in Chávez and allowed him to join opposition Colombian senator Piedad Córdoba in acting as a mediator between the government and FARC rebels in an exchange of hostages for jailed rebels.

That mediation served as a big boost for Chávez in his domestic and foreign policy. It enhanced his role as a leader at a time when his image was being heavily questioned because of his radicalisation and unpopular measures, such as closing down Venezuela's most popular television station and a proposal to amend the Constitution so he could stay in power indefinitely and institutionalise his authoritarian socialist model. It also allowed him to minimise the adverse impact of several national and international corruption scandals (like the case of the suitcase in Argentina) in which the government was involved.

Here, too, the pendulum effect in bilateral relations manifested itself. In late 2007, tension rose between the two governments because Uribe decided to remove Chávez from his role as mediator with the FARC. The Venezuelan leader had failed in this mission and violated the ground rules of his assignment. This led Chávez to freeze diplomatic relations with Colombia and remain involved –this time without permission from Colombia– in attempts to win the release of rebel-held hostages, dealing directly with leaders of the FARC. Even though the Uribe government facilitated and provided logistical support for the release of several hostages in early 2008 at the request of Chávez, on Venezuelan soil, Uribe made clear that he was unhappy with how his colleague across the border had acted unilaterally.

Colombia grew even more irritated when Chávez aired publicly a proposal to remove the Colombian guerrillas from the international list of terrorist organisations and recognise it as a military force engaged in a war. The Colombian government rejected the idea out of hand, but maintained its policy of not allowing itself to be provoked by its neighbour. It simply asked Venezuela to adopt a position of respect and non-interference in Colombia's domestic affairs, halt its verbal attacks against Uribe and abandon its clear bias in favour of the guerrillas.

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This new crisis of late 2007 and early 2008 between Caracas and Bogotá was quite serious. But what still lay ahead was a diplomatic conflict that took relations to their most strained point in many years.

### *The Brink of War*

Over the course of eight years of back-and-forth relations between Chávez and Uribe, there have been many times that the Venezuelan leader either predicted or threatened to unleash a military conflict between the two countries. But it was not until early March 2008 when this prospect almost became a reality. And it was not because of the Colombian government but rather that of Venezuela, which, acting out of solidarity with Ecuador, adopted a series of measures against Colombia which did in fact take the countries to the brink of military conflict. A day after Colombian military forces entered Ecuadorean territory and attacked a FARC camp, killing more than 20 rebel fighters, among them Raúl Reyes, the FARC's deputy commander, Chávez waded into the crisis by closing the Venezuelan embassy in Bogotá, expelling the Colombian ambassador in Caracas, sending 10 battalions of troops to the border with Colombia and threatening to deploy Russian fighter bombers. Chávez called the Colombian raid against the FARC a 'cowardly murder' and observed a minute of silence in honour of Reyes, praising him as a 'consistent revolutionary'.

Chávez's reaction was harshly criticised both inside and outside Venezuela. Many analysts and politicians, including some leaders of the Colombian opposition Democratic Pole, called it disproportionate. No one could understand why Chávez was getting so involved in an issue that did not concern him. And his attitude made clear what side he was on in a conflict that has affected the people of Colombia and all of the Andean region for 50 years.

But just as quickly as he jumped into the fray, the Venezuelan leader got right back out. To the surprise of many, at the meeting of the Rio Group on 7 March in the Dominican Republic, he adopted a position of moderation, tried to reconcile the governments of Ecuador and Colombia, and rolled back the military moves he had ordered just days earlier. Later, he officially declared the diplomatic conflict with Colombia over, called Uribe and arranged with him to hold a bilateral summit to re-launch the countries' relations.

Why the sudden change of heart? We should consider various factors. On the one hand, from the outset Chávez found himself in a dead end from which he had no way to emerge as a hero because Colombia said it would not move a single soldier to the border with Venezuela (and it takes two to fight a war). Secondly, there was Uribe's decision, announced shortly before the summit in the Dominican Republic, to file suit against Chávez at the International Criminal Court for 'sponsoring and financing genocide', on the basis of evidence taken from computers seized in the raid into Ecuador. The material is still being verified by Interpol. But Colombia says it clearly links Chávez to the FARC, among other things by providing it with US\$300 million and hundreds of second-hand rifles. Colombia also says the computers show detailed records of hostage releases and that these were planned and coordinated jointly by the rebels with Chávez and senator Córdova, with the goal of reaping political benefits.

In third place one must consider the recommendations and calls to reason that came from other Latin American leaders, such as Dominican President Leonel Fernández, Brazil's Luiz Inácio 'Lula' Da Silva and former Cuban President Fidel Castro. They were all worried by a military escalation that would have drawn in Colombia's main ally, the US,

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with unpredictable results. Finally, there is the undeniable fact that the possibility of a military conflict with Colombia –far from stirring up nationalist and anti-Colombian sentiment, which would have favoured the image of the President at a time of great popular discontent– was strongly frowned on by most Venezuelans. Many had started to stage street protests to demand peace. A recent survey by Venezuelan pollster *Varianzas Opinión* found that 89% of Venezuelans would not support a war with Colombia.

Other recent polls say that after the crisis between Colombia and Venezuela, Chávez's approval rating has gone down but that of Uribe has surpassed 80%. Furthermore, military sources say that in the Venezuelan armed forces the President's behaviour was unpopular; many officers did not understand why they should fight their sister nation, the Republic of Colombia, and what is worse, they did not have a clear idea of who the enemy was in this case. How could they think the enemy is the legitimate government of Colombia, which fights the criminal businesses of kidnapping, drug trafficking, hit squads and terrorism, which is all that the FARC represents?

**Conclusions:** Even though the pre-war state has been deactivated and Colombian-Venezuelan relations have returned to their usual state of pragmatic understanding, it would be an error to think the underlying conflict between the governments has been resolved and that there is no possibility of new diplomatic impasses which might put the bilateral relationship not on a war footing but close to a new rupture. Now it seems less likely the situation will lead to a military conflict. And this is not just because of popular sentiment in Venezuela against this possibility, but because the main ally of Chávez in a war against Colombia, the FARC guerrillas, are in a precarious situation politically and militarily. There is even speculation that the Cuban government is trying to convince Chávez of the need to admit that the Colombian guerrillas, as an armed movement, are politically defeated and that what remains of their military power could be destroyed relatively soon.

In any case, tension remains between the two governments, although now it is more hidden. This became apparent at a meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of American States (OAS) on 18 March, when the Venezuelan delegate sided with his colleague from Ecuador to work toward a resolution condemning the Colombian incursion into Ecuadorean territory. In the end such a resolution did not materialise. The Ministers chose instead to 'reject' the incursion rather than 'condemn' it. And under pressure from Colombia, they created a mechanism to verify the security situation on the border between Colombia and Ecuador. Just as the Rio Group did, the OAS committed to fighting threats to the security of its members from rebel groups or criminal organizations, in particular those linked to drug trafficking.

Another breakdown of the pragmatic understanding between Uribe and Chávez might come at any time. The results of the Interpol analysis of the computers belonging to Raúl Reyes might give rise to another diplomatic incident.

It is hard to understand Hugo Chávez's drive to pick fights with Colombia on the diplomatic front. He is increasingly isolated internationally, and things are turning against him more and more at home politically, economically and socially. So the sensible thing to do would be to rectify and seek a permanent understanding with his country's neighbour and main trading partner.

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This determination of his seems to stem essentially from the particular personality of President Chávez and his belief –just as Fidel Castro believed in the 1960s– that a confrontation with another country can stir up popular support at home, especially in a year in which there are regional elections. But this is an erroneous view. These days many polls show that most Venezuelans do not want their government to keep wasting time and energy on useless external spats, or spending money on an expansionist international policy. What Venezuelan society wants is for the government to bring about peace both at home and abroad, and that it concern itself with governing and improving Venezuela’s socio-economic situation.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that in Venezuela’s project of Bolivarian expansion in South America, the main geo-strategic goal is Colombia, the cornerstone of a future ‘Greater Colombia’ (*Gran Colombia* in Spanish). So it is unlikely that President Chávez will stop trying to destabilise Colombia’s government and influence the course of its domestic policy.

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