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## The Context Behind the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan Border Dispute

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The dispute between Nicaragua and Costa Rica stems from an island located at the mouth of the San Juan River, which forms the border between the two countries. The dispute has been simmering for a month as a result of Nicaragua's decision to send troops to the region. Several reasons have been put forward for the action, including the concern of Daniel Ortega, the Nicaraguan president, with narco-traffickers in the region and the need for a military presence to discourage them.

In response to what Costa Rica's president, Laura Chinchilla, has called an 'invasion', the matter was referred to the Organisation of American States (OAS). Last Friday the OAS passed a resolution by 22 votes to one in support of Costa Rica and that Nicaragua remove its troops – a request that Ortega has refused. Instead he has suggested taking the dispute to The Hague for resolution, claiming that the OAS has no right to rule on international borders.

The one vote in favour of Nicaragua came from Venezuela. That in itself was significant, since the two are allies and members of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). The organisation was set up in response to the US-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), emphasising regional cooperation on the basis of social and political ties rather than markets and economic liberalisation and deregulation. In addition to these two countries, Cuba, Ecuador and Bolivia are also members of ALBA, all of whom are noted for the opposition to US hegemony in the hemisphere.

Venezuela's support of Nicaragua is a fact that has been noted but not really analysed by the media. At the same time, there does not appear to have been any explanation why Ortega should have carried out his actions now rather than at another time. This is contrast to the media attention surrounding Costa Rica's lack of an army and response in sending police forces to the border region. In addition, media reports have also noted that the US has been presented as willing to act as a mediator, if asked to do so.

Arguably the reason for the current situation, including Nicaragua's recent decision and Venezuela's support of it, may well be due to wider regional politics – and especially the growing presence of the US in Central America. First, the 'war on drugs' has prompted the US to seek a larger role in the region, either in the search for allies or through direct involvement in the struggle against drug gangs. The most notable of these has been its various agreements with Colombia which have enabled it to increase both the number of American bases and troops there. In addition to tackling the drug trade at source, the US has also expanded its influence in the drug supply route, through Central America. In addition to Panamanian bases, the US also recently signed an agreement with Costa Rica last July to allow 46 warships and 7000 troops into the country.

Second, the rise of American influence in the region has coincided with concern by significant sections of these countries' political and civil societies. In particular there is concern about what American intentions are beyond the 'war on drugs'. In part this may be explained by the Left's general antipathy towards Washington and the legacy of American meddling in the region, especially during the Cold War. More recently, it reflects suspicions that Washington may be working against these leftist governments. Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez, was overthrown by a coup in 2002, an action which brought swift recognition from Washington at the time, only for the provisional government to collapse days later. In June 2009, Manuel Zelaya, the Honduran president who brought his country into ALBA, was kicked out of office and forced into exile. Although the Obama administration condemned the action, the US was one of the first countries in the hemisphere to recognise the result of subsequent election that took place later in the year. It also pushed for the reinstatement of Honduras back into the OAS, following its suspension after the coup. And following the aborted coup against Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, at the end of September, left-wingers have been looking to see if there were any American fingerprints left behind.

Ortega's decision to send troops to the border may therefore be read against these developments. On the one hand it demonstrates a determination to exert his power over the armed forces, crucial if any coup attempt is to be avoided. At the same time, it may be seen as sending a signal, both to Costa Rica and the US that Ortega is no pushover, whether in the struggle against the drug trade or as a leader that can be removed at any time. As a result, while others in the region (e.g. Panama) have taken offence at Ortega's rhetoric that other countries have not acted strongly enough against narco-traffickers, it may well be a signal to ensure that Washington backs off – whether in pressuring Ortega to carry out action against the drug trade himself, or to push disaffected elements of Nicaraguan society that would like to see him removed.

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