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## A puzzling scenario? UNITAS exercises in Peru

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Last weekend the UNITAS naval exercises between the US and several South American navies, including 1300 from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, and soldiers from Canada, came to an end. This regional event is designed to develop marine training and encourage regional cooperation. It has been going on since 1960, although the format has changed in that time. In its early years it consisted of a series of bilateral training between the US navy as it visited individual South American states. Today it has expanded into a multilateral event, sometimes including allies from outside the hemisphere; Britain, Germany and Spain have previously taken part.

What is intriguing were the limited details that the American military Southern Command, SOUTHCOM, has provided of the final '[peacekeeping exercise scenario](#)' that the various participants will do to test their previous training. According to a recent email bulletin from Resumen Latinoamericano (a portal where regional journalists investigate and publish stories that do not make the mainstream media), that scenario took place last week about 25km north of Lima and had as its aim military recovery of a hypothetical country in a state of chaos following a coup.

SOUTHCOM's reticence and Resumen Latinoamericano's details are especially interesting given the experience of coups in the region and the current state of current affairs. First, the content of such a scenario seems unconnected with reality. Although it was hypothetical, there are relatively few cases of coups in the region that have left the country in a state of social, political – and indeed, military – disorder. In the region's recent history (at least as long as the UNITAS exercises have been running) almost all coups have occurred as a result of coalition between civilian elites and the armed forces. From Brazil in 1964 to Argentina, Chile and Uruguay in the 1970s, coups occurred during a period of social and political instability. Moreover, after they took place, order – albeit of a repressive kind – was restored.

Even Honduras in 2009 broadly followed this pattern: the former president Manuel Zelaya proved a controversial character, building up suspicion on the side of the opposition. This led to the Zelaya's loss of legislative support and a growing political instability following his decision to hold a referendum as a means of breaking the deadlock. The disconnection between the politicians and society was exacerbated by Zelaya's base being mainly among the social movements. But failing to take account of the disaffection among his rivals, Zelaya did not fully appreciate the risk he faced, which culminated in an alliance between the opposition and elements which launched the coup. Following this removal what isolated protests occurred were quickly shut down, as the coup's leaders exerted political control.

By contrast, the only case that accords with the scenario adopted during the UNITAS exercise would be that of Venezuela in 2002. In that instance the coup was not achieved with a strong and unified coalition between civilians and military. Rather the key coup plotters were drawn from the country's social, political and economic elite. In the days following Chavez's removal the country was in a state of disorder, with no clear lines of authority. While the coup plotters claimed to be in charge – and received swift US backing – the majority of the armed forces held back, refusing to place their support behind them.

Could the case of Venezuela have provided the basis for this scenario then? If so this relates to the second point about the recently finished UNITAS exercise. Last week Venezuela broke off diplomatic relations with its neighbour after the Colombian ambassador and Washington said there was a case to answer regarding Venezuelan support (tacit or otherwise) for FARC guerrillas in its territory. On Sunday (25 July) Chavez ratcheted up the tension by linking the Colombian claims with US interests and announcing that he would stop oil exports to the US if Colombia attacked.

However, if this scenario is indeed designed to address a situation like that between Venezuela and Colombia, at least two points need to be addressed. First, it is not entirely clear that the scenario accurately reflects the current crisis. It was designed to address an internal collapse of order (a coup) rather than a threat from outside (a conflict between states). While external factors have contributed to the internal destabilisation of countries (the CIA's subversion against Allende in Chile springs to mind), most coups have been driven by domestic actors. Moreover, it is hard to see any weakness in Chavez's position at

present. There is no widespread social instability which is needed for elite mobilisation against the government; a coup does not appear on the cards in Venezuela at this time.

Second, it is not apparent why a military solution would be the favoured response by either the US or its South American allies to a coup/attack. Recent examples show a preference for diplomatic over military solutions. There has not been a war between countries since 1995 (between Ecuador and Peru) which resulted in Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean and American mediation. More recently, measures have been taken to discourage coups both before and after the event. Honduras, for example, was suspended from both regional and sub-regional organisations, such as the Organisation of American States and the Central American Integration System, following its coup. By contrast in 2008 a potential coup in Bolivia was headed off through a common UNASUR statement in support for the country's president, Evo Morales.

In sum then, the current bad state of affairs between Venezuela and Ecuador on the one hand and the uncertain objectives of the UNITAS peacekeeping scenario on the other may seem purely coincidental. Yet it does raise wider questions about the nature of both internal and external conflict in South America, from social and political instability on the one hand and civilian-military relations and the forms of post-coup control on the other. It invites consideration of the value of such training exercises. Should they be entirely hypothetical and ungrounded in reality? Or, if they were more related to the real world, could that fuel both the general public suspicion of US motives and rhetoric of leaders like Chavez?

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