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## A new low for Colombian-Venezuelan relations?

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Relations between Colombia and Venezuela appear to have hit a new low. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed by Venezuela's government following the Colombia ambassador's presentation before the OAS last Thursday (22 July) that Venezuela 'tolerates' up to 1500 FARC guerrillas on its side of the border. On Friday the Venezuelan defence minister, Carlos Mata said that Venezuela was prepared to use force if Colombian troops attempted to cross the border.

Much of the roots of the current crisis may be found in outgoing [Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's policies against the FARC and the other main rebel group, the ELN](#). Elected in 2002, Uribe promised to take a hard line against both. The US, which has placed both groups on its list of terrorist organisations, has supported Uribe in this regard, providing his government with significant amounts of foreign aid and military assistance.

As a result of this pressure, both groups have been largely weakened, both in terms of numbers and resources. At the same time it has encouraged them to seek sanctuary in the less controlled border regions of Venezuela and Ecuador. Added to this have been a series of allegations from the Colombian side that, since the early 2000s, the FARC has had close links with Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez, including financial assistance. The most notable claim in this regard followed a Colombian cross-border raid into Ecuador in 2008 where a FARC unit was killed and a laptop recovered in which data relating to Venezuelan support was found.

The Colombians have demanded an international mission to inspect the sites it claims are being used by the FARC. The US State Department has echoed its ally, not only saying that the allegations are serious, but being especially critical of Venezuela's response. However, following the Colombians' presentation and demand, the OAS secretary general, [Jose Miguel Insulza, said that this was not possible without Venezuela acquiescence](#). This suggests that the demand is therefore a non-starter.

Instead there are currently moves to shift the forum for discussion of the issue away from the OAS and towards UNASUR. Ecuadorian president and president tempore of UNASUR, Rafael Correa, has asked its chair, Nestor Kirchner, to meet with Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, as well as the Colombian president-elect, Juan Manuel Santos.

The purpose of using UNASUR is designed to exclude Washington. As an organisation comprised of only South American countries, the aim of Ecuador and its ally Venezuela is to limit the involvement and intervention of third parties such as Washington. In 2008 the organisation sidelined the US by providing a forum to discourage a potential coup against Bolivian president Evo Morales. In addition, last year Venezuela used UNASUR as a forum to isolate Colombia over its decision to expand the use of its military bases with the US. It may well see UNASUR's involvement as a way to draw support for itself against Colombia's claims – which will be weakened by the absence of a regional ally.

The timing of Kirchner's visit is significant in this regard. He is scheduled to meet with Chavez, Uribe and Santos in two weeks, around the time of Santos's inauguration. Not only have tensions between the Venezuelan and Colombian leaders been political (Uribe a right-winger and Chavez a self-styled 21st century socialist), but there is strong personal antipathy between the two; the language used by them has been antagonistic to say the least.

Consequently, it would not be too surprising if, following Kirchner's visit, some jointly agreed communiqué was drafted between Chavez and Santos following the latter's inauguration. This would probably involve a general agreement to cooperate on matters of regional security and fight against terrorism without specifying the FARC by name or making any clear demands on either side. This would probably then be followed by Chavez restoring full diplomatic relations with Colombia. That would make him look not only generous, but also highlight his 'victory' over Uribe, by not only having outlasted his foe but also preparing the ground for a better dialogue with his successor. Indeed, some commentators, [including Michael Shifter of the Inter-](#)

[American Dialogue](#) and [Jimena Blanco of the Latin American Newsletters](#) suggest that matters should improve between the two countries, given Santos's greater pragmatism.

However, without a clear Venezuelan statement or action regarding its position with the FARC, the underlying causes of this current spat will remain unresolved; namely Colombia's more active policy against the guerrillas and Venezuela's ambiguous relationship to them. As I have already pointed out in a previous post, Santos is as conservative and committed to the hardline policy against the guerrillas as his former boss. Indeed, it was Santos who oversaw the extension of the military base agreement with the US that Caracas was so incensed by last year. So while Colombian-Venezuelan relations in the first few days of a Santos presidency will no doubt appear generally positive in contrast to the previous period, this is unlikely to last – even if the confrontation becomes less personally abusive than before.

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