

ESCALATION AND SPONTANEOUS FRATERNIZATION IN THE ANDES

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When tension escalated between Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela in March of this year, threatening to turn the countries' worst diplomatic crisis so far into a military conflict, the world became aware of the instability of this region, which is divided by a deep political and ideological rift. And yet: Only one week after Raúl Reyes, the number two in Colombia's terrorist FARC, was killed by Colombian units on Ecuadorian territory, the spook came to an end, and the heads of the states involved embraced or at least shook hands. How come?

All this does in fact give rise to some questions, especially as the death of the FARC rebel, Mr Reyes, revealed much that is alarming: Latin America's states have indeed shown themselves capable of resolving a conflict, but they lack efficient structures that could serve as conflict resolution mechanisms. Tensions grow and relax at the command of caudillos whose actions are guided by emotions. The region's governments do not trust one another. Discussions on matters of international law are used as political tools. Border disputes could still give rise to confrontations. The leaders of Colombia's neighbouring countries support terrorist organizations or at least sympathize with them. And finally, the continent is divided between democratic governments leaning towards the left or the right on the one hand and populist regimes on the other.

What is more, the policies of certain European states vis-à-vis the region are dangerous as well. France, for example, stated that it might stop classifying the FARC— an organization that still holds more than 700 people hostage – as a terrorist group if it released the half-French former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. In this context, the initiative of Colombia's head of state, Mr Uribe, is probably more reasonable as he showed himself willing to stop calling the FARC a terrorist movement as soon as it refrained from kidnapping people in general and agreed to peace negotiations.

However, the FARC also is affected by a new dynamic. Ever since Mr Uribe assumed office in 2002, it has been reeling in military terms and threatened by internal disintegration. During Mr Uribe's term of office, 8,000 FARC fighters laid down their arms. The strength of the organization, which the population rejects more and more openly and resolutely, is usually given as 15,000. Finally, the blow against Mr Reyes could in fact land because his hideout was betrayed by local informers and because modern target-finding technology from the USA was employed.

The tactic applied by Venezuela's and Ecuador's presidents, Mr Chávez and Mr Correa, of diverting the attention of Colombia's army from the FARC front and luring it to the borders ended in failure. It is not least because of this that Colombia's government is facing a new problem: When the military strength of the FARC weakened, it increasingly withdrew to the border areas of the neighbouring countries where it feels safe. The camp in Ecuador, where Mr Reyes and 23 of his fighters were killed, had a solid infrastructure. Here, Mr Reyes used his laptops which, after his death, provided voluminous evidence of the friendly cooperation between him and Venezuela's head of state, Mr Chávez.

The close relations between Mr Reyes and Mr Chávez are well documented, especially now that the contents of Mr Reyes' computers have been analyzed: It was found that Mr Chávez not only paid the FARC 300 million dollars but also supplied it with equipment. At an earlier point in time, when Mr Chávez himself was in prison after the failed coup in Caracas, the FARC paid him 50,000 Dollars. And Mr Reyes' last phone call via satellite that was monitored by Colombia was to Mr Chávez. On his weekly television show, 'Aló Presidente', Mr Chávez duly observed a minute's silence for his dead 'friend'.

Ecuador's government also practiced an intense exchange with Mr Reyes, as his saved e-mails reveal. In 2006, for instance, the FARC gave Mr Correa money for his campaign, and there was a meeting between Ecuador's Security Minister, Mr Larrea, and Mr Reyes in the border area. Hostages were exchanged, and there were plans for a meeting between a FARC delegation and Mr Correa in Quito. Unlike Venezuela, Ecuador is trying to present all this as relations with a 'humanitarian character', especially as it appears impossible to prove direct financial or military transfers.

These events show one thing: There is no cooperation between the governments in the region and their mutual distrust encourages groups like the FARC. To be sure, Mr Uribe infringed the sovereignty of Ecuador as well as the UN Charter with his action, but among governments which get along well an escalation could have been prevented. And Mr Uribe made a technical mistake when he refused to inform Quito of the operation he had organized against Mr Reyes. These uncertainties heated up the atmosphere in Ecuador, and Mr Correa was hurt personally. His grudge is deep; to this day, diplomatic relations have not been resumed. In addition, the refugees who were driven from their villages by the FARC and are now living in Ecuador also suffer from the anti-Colombian atmosphere.

However, Mr Uribe's blow against Mr Reyes is not the only event that nurtures anti-Colombian feelings among Ecuador's population. Violations of the country's air sovereignty by Colombian planes have led to several

protests and poisoned the bilateral relationship as much as the spraying of coca plants growing on Ecuador's territory with chemicals, which was arranged by Bogotá. In view of all this, it remains a mystery why Mr Correa should sympathize with those who are responsible for coca cultivation and border problems.

When he polemically called Colombia the 'new Israel in America' which, at the instruction of the 'US imperialists', causes disquiet in the region by launching pre-emptive strikes, Mr Chávez scored an own goal. Given the information taken from Mr Reyes' laptops, Venezuela would have to be equated in this scenario with Syria or Iran, which also support terrorist organizations – Hizbollah and Hamas – and thus offer terrorism a platform against Israel.

The fact that several Latin American states swung to the left in 2006 initially gave rise to hope for new ideas to solve the social question. However, instead of tackling the structural problems within their countries, left-wing populists of the Chávez and Correa ilk sought pacts with the guerrillas. In view of all this, the fact is to be welcomed that the Rio Group was able at the last moment to defuse the conflict triggered by the death of the FARC leader, Mr Reyes, and the same holds true for the plan to establish a permanent security council within the OAS. Another positive development is that Nicaragua agreed to resolve its maritime border conflict with Colombia within the Rio Group. Finally, it remains to be hoped that, inspired by the result of Santo Domingo, the Democrats in the US Congress will see their way to signing the planned free trade agreement with Bogotá. Being the region's biggest exporter, Colombia would be hit particularly hard by an economic blockade.

Moreover, Venezuela, Colombia's second most important trading partner after the USA, could only lose in the event of an economic blockade against Colombia. National price controls would reduce industrial production, and bottlenecks might tighten. Moreover, the opposition would be given a boost – certainly no pleasant vision for Mr Chávez who must tread cautiously after his defeat in the recent referendum on the constitution.

However, Venezuela's President must hold himself back for other reasons as well. Only one in three Venezuelans agreed with the movement of troops to the Colombian border. Mr Uribe's action, on the other hand, was backed by 80 percent of his fellow countrymen. Only half the population of Ecuador favoured expelling Colombia's ambassador. And only one third of Colombia's population supported Mr Uribe's intention to sue Mr Chávez at The Hague. The people living in the states of the Andean region are closely linked by a common history. It seems that in the most recent conflicts, a majority shares views and feelings that differ widely from those of their heads of state.

That it was none other than Mr Chávez who took the first step towards reconciliation probably results from the 'tropical' factor. He does feel respect for Mr Uribe, while Mr Correa who does not share the caudillo nature of his colleagues found it difficult to shake hands with the Colombian. Thus, the overheated atmosphere was followed by reconciliation, but the controversial questions themselves remained unresolved. It is alarming that the fate of the 'brother states' should depend less on functioning institutions and more on the silk thread of their presidents' patience.

Now the turmoil is over. It has shown that much is possible between Mr Uribe and Mr Chávez. However, it has also shown that the FARC has lost its political function – it has been reduced to a gang of drug dealers, kidnappers, and criminals without any real political message but with a terrorist potential that is still very high. The organization cannot be brought down by purely military actions; what is needed is politics. Colombia's head of state will hardly be able to avoid making concessions.

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