

Colombian Relations with Venezuela and Ecuador in the Regional Security Scenario: Recent Dilemmas and New Tendencies

Eduardo Pastrana Buelvas

Director of the International Relations Department of Pontificia Javeriana University and Editor of the Magazine *Papel Político* – Colombia

By the end of the first decade in the 21st century, the balance of the trilateral relations between Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela is contradictory and extremely complex. The Colombian Democratic Security Policy (PSD) legacies and regional repercussions as well as its collision with the Ecuadorian and Venezuelan “revolutions” security doctrines, pose a high degree of uncertainty and numerous challenges to the normalization and stabilization of political and diplomatic relations, and the revival of the cooperation and integration dynamics. The relevance and importance of the political task, currently developed by President Santos in Colombia, which entails an approximation towards Ecuador and Venezuela, will undoubtedly depend on the stances and consequences that remained from the age of Uribe Vélez in terms of recognizing security, defense and foreign policies.

The stance adopted so far by President Santos’ administration towards its neighbors –pragmatic, without presumptions, and without ideological radicalism– has been complemented with an intense diversification agenda concerning its foreign affairs and the recovery of the government’s interest in the Latin American integration processes. This has highly benefited the neighboring relations, but cannot simply become a “start from scratch” practice. In the present article, an account of the main hindrances in the trilateral relations, an examination of the Andean “arms race” issue and an analysis of its erroneous foreign policy strategies, are proposed. This task is complemented with two additional sections: an analytical approach to the possibility of war between Colombia and Venezuela and an update of the diplomatic approximation in the beginning of the Santos’ Age.

Retrospective of the Most Visible Conflicts and Tensions

Between Colombia and Venezuela

Generally speaking, the problems that emerged between Colombia and Venezuela's detailed summary can be made based on Benítez, Celi, and Jácome (2010, pp.7-11) and others can be added, such as:

- a) Venezuela has attempted to become the regional opponent of Colombia's and the US' security cooperation efforts.
- b) Its military equipment acquisition policy has led to a decrease of trust throughout the Colombian public and government (The level and type of acquisitions are considered disproportionate compared to the "real" internal and external threats faced by Venezuela, and a double jeopardy is reported regarding the possibility that it could nourish both an escalation of the Colombian internal conflict due to the deviation of Venezuelan weapons to illegal groups, and the unleashing of a regional arms race reply due to the competition between neighboring States, thus disrupting the balance of power.)
- c) Venezuela, in turn, claims that Colombia is responsible for causing regional imbalance due to its strengthened military capability and for favoring the dominating espionage practices and influence exercised by the US in South America, while Colombia informs that it only aims to increase its internal reaction capability against domestic threats, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and drug traffickers.
- d) Instead of using diplomatic or non-official channels to clear out any tensions concerning sensitive issues, Colombia has accused Venezuela before the OAS and the entire world by declaring that the country tolerates the existence of FARC camps and the visits of its representatives, all the while Venezuela has reported that paramilitary troops, Administrative Department of Security (DAS) officials and US agents have been behind espionage and sabotage practices, as well as coup d'état plans against the Caracas government.
- e) Chavez' intervention attempts pleading international recognition of the FARC as a belligerent and non-terrorist force, as well as the pressure exerted by the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) jointly with Ecuador in order to advocate a negotiation between the Colombian government and the FARC, have raised the level of distrust in Colombia toward any type of Venezuelan mediation or interest in this regard.
- f) Venezuela's rejection to the Colombia Plan and the cooperation with the DEA in the fight against drug traffic has resulted in a struggle between the Colombian-American and Venezuelan figures vis-à-vis its own anti-drug strategy.
- g) Hugo Chávez' assumption of extraordinary powers remarkably influences the arbitrary and egocentric handling of his Foreign Policy. Although his goal is to surmount the internal governance crisis facing multiple adverse, not clearly defined economic and social factors and to accelerate the transformation of a "bourgeois" State into a "socialist" State, the deinstitutionalizing consequences for the foreign affairs system have been unavoidable. Currently, President Chávez resorts to a fourth Enabling Act, arguing that its relevance can be found in the winter emergency that left around 132,786 affected inhabitants in 2010.
- h) The legal battle between former President Uribe and President Chávez due to the lawsuits filed by the former Colombian President's lawyers against the Venezuelan Head of

State constitutes more than a personal dispute. There have been attempts to indict the Venezuelan President before the International Criminal Court for his complicity related to the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the FARC. He is also accused before the International Human Rights Court due to violations to the American Human Rights Convention for protecting or sheltering terrorists and criminals.

Between Colombia and Ecuador

A summary of disputes between Colombia and Ecuador can be also made in this regard based on Benítez, Celi, and Jácome (2010, pp. 11-13), others can be added, such as:

- a) The existence of a highly permeable borderline which can be easily trespassed by illegal armed groups, drug traffickers and criminals, which both lacks a shared and mutually binding surveillance system and is very vulnerable in social-economic terms.
- b) Colombia's engagement in a head-on approach against drug traffic and the guerrilla have a lasting impact on the Ecuadorian side, and there are no clear self-containment mechanisms, especially due to the fact that the "opportunity principle" prevails.
- c) Ecuador's arrogance in filing lawsuits before its national courts or the international criminal justice against Colombian senior officials, such as the former Secretary of Defense and current President, Juan Manuel Santos, and the former Commanding General of the *Colombian Armed Forces* and current Ambassador of Colombia in Austria, Freddy Padilla De León, because of their alleged intellectual liability in the illegal bombing at Ecuadorian territory in the so called "Operation Phoenix".
- d) Ecuador's permanent distrust in getting involved in the Colombia Plan and in the US-Colombian security strategy, in addition to its reluctance to establish specific coordination mechanisms by resorting to the principle stating "each one takes care of their own backyard".
- e) The Bi-National Commission of Frontiers' (Combifron) intermittent and weak nature as a solving mechanism for bilateral security dilemmas.
- f) The ongoing process of the two international lawsuits brought by Ecuador against Colombia, one before the International Court of Justice concerning the harmful effects of aerial fumigations with glyphosate over the other border side, and the other one before the Inter-American Court of Justice for the death of an Ecuadorian as a result of an illegal bombing.

The Three Andean Countries' "arms race" as an obstacle to the integration in terms of security and defense.

The military acquisitions have experienced a particularly remarkable increase in Latin America in the last decade, inevitably bringing along rumors concerning "arms races" that evoke old borderline disputes, old remnants inherited from the Cold War's extinct ideological bipolarity that initiate new political conflicts between "conservative" and "alternative" governments, and new domestic, bilateral and regional security dilemmas. According to recent figures, Latin America's volume of transferred arms increased by 47% in the period between 2003 and 2007 vs. 1998-2002 (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 166). According to the report issued in 2009 by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the military expenditure in South America increased remarkably during the last years reaching up to 48.1 trillion USD in 2008, recording an overall

increase of 50% in this field during the decade of 1999-2008, compared to the previous decade (SIPRI, 2009, p. 2). In 2009, South America experienced an overall military expenditure of near 51.8 trillion USD, even despite the world economic crisis context (SIPRI, 2010, p. 10). Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela have not escaped this overall dynamic, even though, as analyzed below, their political motivations, their orientation, and procurement capacity in this field have been different, although invariably related to their geographic proximity, a transnational overflow of the Colombian domestic armed conflict and the reality of an ideological conflict that has affected and, to some extent, transformed their trilateral relations.

At a first glance, the Venezuelan “arms race” –linked to the ALBA project– would attempt to be a dissuasive response to the orthodox influence of the USA in the political, military and commercial spheres in Latin America, and a persuasive source to gather smaller nations in the region and capabilities within its proto-socialist influence sphere. The Colombian “arms race” would obey internal counter-insurgency needs and a re-alignment with the US towards the recovery of the hegemonic legitimization of US Americans in the region. The previous, after a period of unpleasant South American “independence” and concentration of US national and global security interests in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, an increase of Ecuador’s armed power would be driven by the revival of old boundary disputes with Peru, an increase of the Peruvian military capacity in the last decade and the close threat of the Colombian “arms race” and its paramilitary groups.

In order to make a deeper analysis of the Andean re-armament policies’ complex background, examining the acquisition details is not enough, since the chain of factors involved in a governmental decision-making process includes motivations, intentions, perceptions, interpretations, historical memory and political environment. International relations compel to a higher extent a certain State or government to the response of both domestic –such as equipment– and external decisions from others, seeing as they always involve mutual expectations regarding the other party’s identity and political decisions (Klotz and Lynch, 2007, p. 17).

Previous to addressing political and interpretative arguments, it seems convenient to make a brief introduction of Venezuelan, Colombian and Ecuadorian military procurement activities:

Venezuela increased its military expenditure by 78% in 2007 compared to 2003, with Russia as its primary supplier (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 169). Between 2005 and 2007, Venezuela and Russia signed 12 weapon supply contracts for an amount presumably higher than 4.4 trillion USD. In 2005, Venezuela acquired ten Mi-35 combat helicopters, three Mi-26 cargo airlift helicopters, forty Mi-17 multipurpose helicopters, a hundred thousand AK-103 rifles and twenty-four Su-30MK fighters from Russia (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 169). Equally, contracts for the construction of two manufacturing plants in Venezuela to produce such types of rifles and its corresponding ammunition were subscribed, in addition to the contracts for the procurement of military technology from Spain, China and Belarus (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 169). The predominant nature



behind this supply has to do with the dual defensive-offensive role that this equipment provides in terms of destructive power and scope, the potential of technological transfer self-supply, and its vendors' multi-pole and competitive origin compared to the US, a traditional and somewhat cautious supplier for Latin-Americans.

On the Colombian side, the material factor alone accounts for a different orientation regarding the purchases' functionality. As of 2003, it has been positioned as one of the States with the highest military expenditure in Latin America, especially if compared with the GDP growth percentage (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 169). It is estimated that in 2008, Colombia disbursed slightly more than 9.076 million USD (SIPRI, 2009, p. 2). When defining this expenditure, two factors are highlighted: one relates to the role of the US as the primary financial and arms supplier (71% of the domestic weaponry), especially through the Colombia Plan, and the other to the incorporation of the Extraordinary Estate Capital Gains Tax established by the Uribe administration, intended to collect some 4 trillion pesos to sustain the Democratic Security Policy (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 169). Since 1990, the North American cooperation has enabled Colombia to acquire five C-130B Hercules airlift planes; thirty-three Bronco OV-10 light combat planes, and more than a hundred Bell-205, Bell-212 and Blackhawk helicopters (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 170). On the other suppliers' side, Colombia has obtained fourteen Tucano (EMB-312) airplanes, and twenty-five Super Tucano "light-combat" airplanes (EMB-314, just like the ones used during the bombing against AKA "Raúl Reyes") from Brazil since the mid '90s, Israeli components and missiles; and four C-295 airlift planes, one CN-235MP airlift plane, and fifteen SBT 150-mm Howitzers from Spain, in addition to sixteen Russian Mi-17 airlift helicopters between 1997 and 2002, as well as an agreement to assemble the BTR-80 troop-carriers (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 170).

This equipment is predominantly intended for domestic use (security needs), but some purchases stand out that are more appropriate for defense purposes, such as the Spanish Howitzers, the Boeing 767 refurbished by Israel for cargo and aerial refueling missions, as well as the twenty-four Israeli Kfir C10 fighter bombers (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 170).

In the case of Ecuador, its recent ranking in military terms had to do with the bilateral conflict with Peru in the borderline zone of Alto Cenepa, as a result of the illegal incursions of Peruvian troops in Ecuadorian territory, and of its open strike and defeat between January and February, 1995. As of the early '90s, the country acquired equipment such as two frigates previously discharged by the British Royal Navy, as well as two C-130 Hercules heavy airlift military planes. Furthermore they purchased Cessna A-37B Dragonfly fighters transferred by the US Air Forces (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 170). In addition to those, there are other aircrafts that the country already owned, such as the Mirage F1, Kfir C.2, Jaguar and multi-purpose helicopters that had an essential role in the conflict. Among its next two stages of improvement, we can mention both the refurbishment of eight of its Kfir according to European standards and the purchase of 222 Russian SA-16 Gimlet air defense missiles (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 170), the definite ending of its competition with Peru, and the new equipment concern caused by the Colombian-Ecuadorian borderline's instability magnified within the Colombia Plan and the PSD framework. Within the context of the illegal bombing conducted by Colombia on Ecuadorian territory in 2008, the 2006 modernizing plan sped up considerably. The purchase of 24 Brazilian EMB-314 Super Tucano planes; 7 Indian HAL ALH Dhruv tactical helicopters; Chinese radars, aircraft and components within a cooperation agreement; an upgrade of its Super Puma helicopters and electronic surveillance systems; the replacement of its tank fleet with Chilean units of Leopard 1V MBT; the purchase of Chilean frigates; and the request of unmanned surveillance aircraft capable of launching strikes, such as IAI Heron and Searcher (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p. 171) has been announced. Up to this date, an additional purchase of 12 South African Cheetah airplanes, idle since 2008 and scalable, in an amount between 74 and 80 million USD² was disclosed.

Now, after slightly outlining some of the strategic reasons on security and defense issues for the purchases made by the three Andean countries, it is convenient to list some of the hypotheses and causal arguments being considered to help question the apparent "arms race" and find other illustrative variables in the trilateral conflict context, in the defensive individualism and in the players' stances, that will enable to escape the argumentative trap related to the "domino effect". This means, that a presumably competitive background can be turned even more complex and can obtain a political meaning, beyond the simple security dilemma, in which the collective distrust towards the armed equipping of a State single handedly promotes the subsequent individual or collective arms race of all its neighbors (Wendt, 1995, pp. 78-79). By reconstructing those approaches, one can find that the "selfish" orientations in terms of security and defense stand out by definition and that the bilateral and regional integration processes are politically obstructed or stalled in the following aspects:

- a) The existing perceptions about military asymmetries that would cause an irreversible change on the balance of power in the Andean region do not operate in all the

bilateral tension scenarios, whose conflict dimension has tended to be essentially political-diplomatic, as well as its management approaches.

- b) Most of the Latin American acquisitions have been encouraged by the need of either upgrading or replacing the “military inventories”, resorting to non-offensive and varied purposes, such as updating capabilities, responding to persistent domestic threats, strengthening political bonds with supplying governments, improving the domestic military industry, among others (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, pp. 166-167). Even though the Venezuelan case seems to lack the rationality and moderation shown by the collective upgrading movement, it is still framed within a large increase and influence strategy, and not within a preparation for an armed confrontation.
- c) Latin American States are implementing equipping programs which have been postponed for several years and were planned previously to the current tensions, driven both by the overall improvement of the regional economic scenario, favored by a worldwide increase in the price of the “commodities” that they offer, and by the aging of their regular “stocks” (Bromley y Guevara, 2009, p. 167). These programs do not originally have a competitive nature, but they are not subdued to regional coordination effort, either.
- d) Many of the acquisitions that Colombia and Ecuador have made are “second-hand”, which fulfill multipurpose functions and depend on the US for the maintenance and operation of their components. This diminishes their discretionary use due to the US pressures. However, in the Venezuelan case, it has encouraged the accentuated diversification of suppliers and a approximation towards Russia and China.
- e) The main “threats” faced in military terms are diverse, being situated in the domestic or foreign spheres, depending on the case. While the main threats for Colombia against the consolidation of the State are domestic (insurgency, paramilitary forces and drug traffickers), in the case of Ecuador they represent the aftermath of the cross-border conflict (illegal incursions by all the armed parties in the conflict, displaced persons trespassing the borders and affected villages in the borderline surroundings), and the internal political instability that usually ends in a coup d’état. In Venezuela, these threats acquire greater ideological connotations and operate in both spheres fueling militarization. From an outside perspective, the US is considered an imperialist power that tends to “invade” opposing governments or support their internal unrest to induce a regime change compatible with its own national interests. Internally, the political opposition is described as a highly dangerous enemy prone to coup d’état practices, to violent outbreaks and even to the infiltration into the State’s key sectors, such as the Army, in strong remembrance of the failed anti-Chávez coup of 2002.
- f) There are multiple political motives that sustain the military upgrade decisions. In the Colombian case, there are two factors that stand out: on the one hand, the governmental decision to allow an “invited” US intervention make up for the national coercive system’s weaknesses toward the FARC, and on the other hand, the intent to approach the US in a development and security “strategic” alignment, but within a subordinated relation (Tickner, 2007, pp. 105-106). There was also an electoral motive behind the scenes in order to ensure a high popularity rate toward the re-election by proving the “resoluteness” of the PSD. In the Venezuelan case, a search for political connections with non-Western powers and States that manufacture arms is initiated, in order to help erode the global US hegemony (Bromley and Guevara, 2009, p.

169) and the creation of an image as a “new power”, capable of displaying protection over “alternate” governments in South America and the Caribbean that are threatened by the US, within a collective defense structure for the ALBA. Likewise, it attempts to become the main partner of the new South American security and defense schemes within the UNASUR frame.

In the case of Ecuador, both the illegal bombings and incursions conducted by Colombian troops, and the increasing borderline permeability in which it’s engaged –despite of its reluctance– are decisive in the development of the internal Colombian conflict. Moreover, it is suggested that the three Andean governments could not only be strengthening their military systems according to their notions of “threat” and “need”, but also satisfying the interests of the military elite groups to preserve their loyalty, particularly because they are democratic regimes that have evolved historically in the midst of frequent political and institutional crises (Benítez, Celi, and Jácome, 2010, p. 7). This has induced the Andean region to re-militarize key security sectors, such as intelligence and even militarist ideas that permeate and ingrain their societies, which –in the case of Venezuela and Ecuador– has been encouraged by the increasing reaction towards the US presence, and the radicalization of their domestic political processes (Maldonado, 2010, pp. 56-58). Within the Venezuelan regime, it has had a greater significance: the government militarization and the Army politicization, which makes it possible for the military sector to merge with other governmental programs and institutions and for the Army members to transition from being neutral safeguarding agents of the democratic constitutional order to advocating actors of the Bolivarian doctrine (Corrales, 2009, p. 71).

- a) The confusion and “merger” between the security and defense policies is a common factor due to the intermestic [international + domestic] nature of the agendas prepared to face cross-border challenges, such as drug traffic, arms trafficking, terrorism and immigration. In this regard, Tibiletti (2001) highlights that the US American school influenced considerably the Latin American military doctrine by defining National Security as the protection against every interest that is considered “vital” by a Nation vis-à-vis any potentially threatening factor, thus submitting National Defense to it and structuring it as the set of measures adopted to meet those individual demands, both domestically and abroad. This vision of a Defense that is subordinated to the individual security is one of the largest hindrances to the Latin American and Andean integration in this field. Matching the aforementioned statement, Ugarte (2010, p. 37) declares that the different domestic security approaches distort the classic notion of a “common defense”, formerly defined as the building of collective answers to inter-State and/or external threats. Thus, the construction of a collective defense agenda must assume every kind of risk factors, both domestic and transnational and even economic, political, and social issues, resulting in the collision among dissimilar interests of Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela within the South American Defense Council (CDS) (Ugarte, 2010, p. 37). In the praxis, this has meant that, although it has been established that the CDS would exclude the domestic security issues and would transfer them to other bodies, such as the “South American Council on the Global Problem of Drugs”, it is not quite appealing for Colombia to discuss a “collective defense”, if the transnational threats are not linked, and even less justify its domestic policies to the region, as Venezuela and Ecuador intend (Ugarte, 2010, p. 37).

- b) Just like all the other UNASUR members –although Colombia’s ratification of the constitutive treaty is pending so far–, the three Andean countries defend the diversity of their national scenarios’ collective recognition in terms of domestic security (internal challenges) and defense (external threats) that enables them to preserve their own mechanisms, methods, legal regulations and instruments to face their respective challenges (Ugarte, 2010, p. 38). Meaning that they do not discard the integration processes’ political relevance within the UNASUR and the CDS, but however, they do not seem to be willing to replace the –already sufficiently blocked– intergovernmental cooperation principle in the security and defense fields with the supranational decision principle.
- c) The trilateral conflict regarding the Colombian ostracism and its security policy, in addition to the collective concern toward the asymmetrical Colombian-American treaty that would cause an increased US surveillance over the Andean region, brought on a positive effect which was the CDS’ operative adjustment. This conflict contributed to creating the need of developing Measures and Warranties in order to Build Confidence and Security (MFCS), as a primary result of the CDS in defense (Ugarte, 2010, p. 31). However, an accentuated military response against threats and uncertainties is still to be addressed, which promotes militarization rooted practices and securitization of the domestic and foreign political agenda, and tightens in view of the frequent political changes and fragility that the current integration options evidence (Leal, 2010, pp. 74-75.).



The Foreign Action Serving a National Security Approach

To a great extent, the “preventive war” concept enforced by the US, which infringes international law and justifies the “opportunity principle” (strike first or strike immediately if the military circumstances are favorable), influenced negatively and heavily the Colombian military actions, such as the “Operation Phoenix” conducted in Angostura (Ecuador). This concept is a response that entitles highly ethical and legal prejudices concerning the international post-war tradition based on principles such as acting in good will and mutual respect to each nation’s sovereignty. Sustaining that there’s need of deploying a sudden State military action (with no previous consultation or controls) as a single or almost exclusive instrument against a non-conventional threat such as fundamentalist or insurgent terrorism, and that said strategy may disregard the national borders and bilateral information and coordination mechanisms in view of factors such as the lack or deficiency of bi-national cooperation or the peer State’s tolerance, it overthrows the entire legal-political symmetry doctrine that underpins the democratic inter-State system.

Recently and due to communication leaks between high-ranked US officials and agents of other nations revealed by “Wikileaks”, it was disclosed that the Colombian government was about to make a unilateral decision in terms of cross-border security, such as the one that originated the diplomatic conflict in December 2004 because of the unilateral capture –coordinated between the US and Colombia– of AKA “Rodrigo Granda”, a FARC representative, in Caracas. In a meeting held in mid-January 2008 between former President Uribe, former US Ambassador in Bogotá, William Brownfield, and the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Michael Mullen, and according to the cable unveiled by the media press, Uribe stated the possibility of authorizing the Colombian troops to cross the border to ensure the capture of FARC members, instead of coordinating their extradition³.

In a pure and realistic power policy, the threatened State –whether factually or hypothetically– chooses to fight that transnational instability or risk factor by disregarding the capability and/or legitimacy of the government that receives that threat, acts in a permissive manner, or does not have the suitable means to counterattack, thus justifying the unilateral actions and non-agreed interventions. Consequently, it is stated that it does not represent an illegal war or a belligerent behavior against the other State in particular, but a “legitimate defense action” carried out in a foreign territory. It does not intend to fight other societies nor destroy the peer State, but that unlawful conduct’s ultimate effects, mainly when it concerns scenarios of a remarkable military asymmetry, end up encouraging precisely such a behavior, especially due to the threat’s ambiguous nature: between the civil and military spheres, with branches in the State’s institutions and agents, but without having seized the systems as a whole (like the alleged “Narco-States” or “Terrorist States”), sometimes anchored or manipulated by legal codes, but very evidently opposed to the legal-moral system, with political aspirations, but without the absolute freedom to excerpt visible activism, among other unclear dimensions.

Another classic national security principle that tended to be exacerbated and distorted in the relations between Venezuela and Ecuador during the PSD in the Uribe Vélez era was the deterrence of State-related external threats. As such, it is more a defense maintenance

principle than one of domestic security and stability, but due to the domestic conflict in Colombia's transnational and political-ideological connotations, it has always operated within an intermestic sphere or field in which domestic risk variables are merged –and sometimes, confused– and endangered the country's foreign relations with its neighbors and the US. Within the strategic sphere, militarizing the State's response to domestic challenges warns the surrounding States on the inherent increase of the military capabilities, although they are presumed and justified as exclusively oriented to face domestic threats, since just one of its consequences, like the perceptible increase of troop members, automatically implies an overall increase of the State's potentially offensive capacity, which would be diametrically opposed to an exclusively police and judicial strengthening.

The mere increase of an offensive capacity does not involve a temptation of usage (explicit aggression) or of hegemony (latent aggression) per se, but it does if embedded in a framework of relations and significances that generate rivalry and distrust. The international relations 'inter-subjectivity' feature makes power more than simply possessing material capacities (power through attributes), but a multiple influence relation (Klotz and Lynch, 2007, p. 11). Here is where the political-ideological variable and the game of quick interpretations of intention come into full-strength action. Concerning the first item, the Colombian governments have shown close ideological affinity with the US over the last twelve years, especially in global economic and political issues, as well as regarding the regional security. This has increasingly collided with the so called "alternate governments" represented in the Andean region by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia. All of them drastically reject the US post-war role as a "global and regional sentinel", its extremely asymmetrical and monopolistic commercial policies, the frontal combat and assisted intervention approach of its anti-drug cooperation programs, and the way it encloses –within the ambiguous concept of "international terrorism"– a whole range of multiple threats in its own national security.

Upon an eventual non-matching and incompatibility of the national security agendas among the Andean countries, the transnational risks become bilateral dilemmas in terms of security and other spheres that trigger the individual defense policies, thus mixing up the rationality of confrontation regarding the non-State risk factor with the rationality of the international deterrence action, whose primary goal consists in provoking fear or concern on the opponent, compelling enough to avoid testing the ground warfare capability, as well as a certain State's temptation to intervene in another State's domestic instabilities. Whenever the cooperation options to face the shared risk are blocked and when the States resort to self-protecting or deterring –even they're only discoursing– strategies, foreign relations only get downgraded as long as a free scope and maneuverability is left for that threat, which can grow whenever the borders are more permeable and detached. If the individualist behavior and self-protection goals are accentuated, the harmonious relation that should be kept between national security and Foreign Policy needs gets out of balance, thus leading to a foreign agenda that's subordinated to the domestic security plan and to the securitization of the shared international influence spheres, which contributes in nourishing the biased stances, as well. In this regard, Der Ghougassian (2004, p. 66), based on the work of Buzan, Weaver and Wilde (1998), states that securitization accesses an intertwining of relations whenever threats take an existential character –a perceived

risk of destruction– thus generating emergency measures and reactive decisions that collide with the game’s rules and postures previously established by the actors to achieve a mutual understanding, even if they are opponents.

The game of quick intention interpretation seems -this time- as an ambiguous principle to guide bilateral decisions when the Foreign Policy is considered a “zero-sum game”, in which an advantage acquired in the opponent’s domestic security or defense capacity means an increase of the other party’s vulnerability; and is responded through a bilateral anticipation/reaction posture. Anticipation hinders the horizontal dialogue and burdens the foreign agenda with forecasts, fears and frequently exaggerated assumptions regarding the other party’s eventual –always negative– intention trend. The reaction often resorts to the emotional nature of the moment, mainly when there is a politically provoked public opinion where populist strategies prevail, and to the speed of an equivalent or increased response based on the other party’s words and actions that are considered an aggression, encouraging spirals of distrust and mutual provocation.

As to the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian cases, their heads of State’s prevailing perception seems to be totally apprehensive and oriented to espionage/coup d’état threats, whenever Colombia decides to reinforce its domestic security plan, particularly when compromising greater disbursements from the national budget for military reinforcement and involving an active US role in financing and consulting/operating functions. In Colombia’s case, and particularly during the Uribe Vélez era, a publicly disseminated apprehension tended to prevail as to the fact that an increase in the armed capacity of Ecuador, and mainly Venezuela, can mean, due to ideological affinity and/or lack of control warranties over inventories, the armed reinforcement of the FARC and/or an authoritarian instauration of a socialist State in the country and the Andean region.

A third geopolitical strategy principle that affected the setup of both a security agenda and a defensive orientation in the cases of Colombia and Venezuela, was the principle of



political-ideological containment; which was - indirectly and to a certain extent - also military. During various episodes, and noticeably more during the regional discussion of the new agreement sought by Colombia with the US to allow extended US use of base camps in its territory, the Colombian government's attitude behind this initiative was interpreted by some spheres as a stratagem that would stop both Hugo Chávez's interventionist intention in the Colombian domestic armed conflict and the domestic policy, as well as a "21st Century Socialism" or "Bolivarian Revolution" continental extension. The public opinion on both sides of the border - and in other South American locations - was almost unanimous in agreeing that the agreement's significance was considerably higher than the Colombian Armed Forces anti-drug and anti-insurgency needs, thus generating even more regional repercussions than domestic advantages. The "need" argument was even more contradictory considering the high figures in Álvaro Uribe's retiring government security balance shown in the end of 2010, which suggested an "early end of the FARC"⁴. Concluding, there currently remains no doubt, after the revelations made by Wikileaks regarding this issue, that the agreement's true goal was deterring Chávez from any attempt of an intervention.

The anti-Soviet containment policy's ghost, raised by the US American George Kennan within the global ideological division context, seemed to temporarily re-emerge in the Andean region. The political-military traditional surveillance US principle over specific geographic spots from a democratic State or from an ally to another -the recipient of its ideological interest- and the defensive nature of the military assistance reinforcement principle to resist an aggression as well as an eventual "ideological contamination" (Carbone, 2006, p. 4). These seemed to direct the agreement's foundations which was justified at that time as exclusively "complementary" to the Colombia Plan framework, exposing its partially defensive nature.

The agreement was presumably a reactive way to equally balance the Venezuelan plans to equip, innovate and manufacture highly destructive armament without entering the arms race's cost spiral, which was unfeasible from a political and financial standpoint. Concerning Venezuela, its accelerated military expenditure rate and its type of purchases surpass Colombia's conventional offensive capacities in this regard, fulfilling its deterring effect in the case of an assumed "Colombian arms race" or cooperation to propitiate an overthrow the current revolutionary government. However, the only plausible intention to justify the argument related to satisfying Venezuela's "legitimate defense needs" seems to be the US' indirect containment effect with which it overtops the Andean States' capabilities, but always -and indistinctively- lags behind the US capabilities. A containment that is not intended to directly offset the US, but to avoid an overflow of the US counterrevolutionary political and military influence from Colombia toward Venezuela.

Colombia-Venezuela: Is War a Possibility?

There have been several attempts to disseminate a blurred climate of opinion during a bilateral crisis: using a lot of passionate versions, lacking analytical depth and discernment to distinguish the abysmal gap between the high risk of an international armed conflict and a simple politicized "war rumor". The "show" and the theatrical nature of the discourses and alarmist press releases must disappear in order to analyze the real background

of the frequent bilateral tensions. To this end, it is useful to discuss some argumentative assertions that rebate such a possibility:

- a) Venezuela and Colombia are two historical confraternities. Their same origin; their democratic, social and cultural connections; their similar political legacies; their natural geopolitical interdependence; their mutual favorable opinion despite the turbulent junctures and controversies between their governments; all these factors represent sources of reciprocity, recognition and identity rooting appreciation that surpasses the differences between political doctrines while being independent, democratic, Andean, coastal, Christian, mixed and Latin American countries. The ideological bills between these communities do not match the cultural, ethnic, or religious frontiers, and the unsolved controversies on some yet to be defined geographical borderline issues have never been a relevant source of open confrontation nor an explicit breeding ground for partisan doctrines.
- b) The US is both countries' first commercial partner; Colombia used to be Venezuela's 2nd partner, but is currently ranged between the 3rd or 4th partner. It is true that after the bilateral commerce between Colombia and Venezuela tripled for the period between 2004 and 2008, even in the midst of a persistent diplomatic crisis, a drop of 33% in 2009⁵ represents an increasing concern to those who trust in the economic-political premise which states that the best bond and prevention strategy against an Inter-State conflict is a dynamic, fluent and interdependent commerce. Up to September 2010, Colombian exports to Venezuela dropped by 69.7% and imports by 48.6%⁶, which sought to replace the bi-national market, but without closing the door to a revitalizing exchange.
- c) It is true that the de-structuring of the Venezuelan domestic market capabilities and its hoarding by a gradually stagnant State, co-opted by the Executive Branch, have generated a perturbing dependence on the Colombian rich supply, an argument exploited by the Venezuelan President to nourish his demagogic anti-Imperialist incendiary speeches, and defend repressive measures on trading, such as restrictions and blockades. However, a context's further detailed analysis should point out the transcendental additional factors about this phenomenon, such as the impact that the global economic crisis has and the Venezuelan currency (Bolivar) behavior.
- d) As a complement to the above, it is necessary to indicate that President Chávez knows in advance that his aspirations of an economic re-boost depend to a great extent on Venezuela's entry in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR, as per its acronym in Spanish) and on a deepened commercial integration into the ALBA, both integration schemes self-defined as democratic and observant of the territorial integrity and the national sovereignty. They also intend to preserve their legitimacy in the international system by involving other principles such as multilateralism, a solution for differences and cooperation based on dialog.
- e) Simply stated, as long as Venezuela depends on insertion into the international system mechanisms in order to economically and politically survive, it will not become a dangerous floating particle, such as North Korea or Iran. Discussing about its oil-related dependence on its largest discourse opponent (the US) is unnecessary. In this regard, the continuous verbal aggression has never matched the Venezuelan foreign policy's mild de-facto decisions, even while adopting a "provocative" attitude with a "wink of Cold War" on its approximation to Russia, China and Cuba.

- f) The US has disregarded both the bilateral conflict's depth and any eventual intervention that might be advantageous in it, and has even offered to serve as a mediator between both countries. The Obama administration has proven to be much more conciliating in its foreign policy (soft power) and less friendly towards taking repressive measures (hard power) to face annoying or less friendly governments, even if maintaining troops in Afghanistan is somewhat of a paradox – a scenario that differs entirely from the Andean neighbors. Venezuela does not represent any real threat to the US, not because of its political identity and/or international alliances structure, nor because of its real combat capabilities possessions, even though it has speculatively increased the degree of its interest and observance of (abundant) Venezuelan statements and (scarce) determinations in terms of foreign policy. Even while accepting the –high– probability of increasing US “espionage” activities conducted from Colombia over Venezuela, besides the extensive use of Colombian base camps near the border, both the Venezuelan people and its armed forces, as well as the remaining weakened, democracy-inhibiting institutional structure, know that this strategic US action is not new and doesn't become a “State's reason” compelling enough to legitimize a concrete force deployment to “safeguard the national sovereignty” or the “sovereign government plan”.
- g) No South-American country accepts the ‘de facto’ conflict possibility and some of them advocate for and/or are willing to mediate in order to maintaining peaceful relations. There could be a political retaliation from the MERCOSUR members to block the Venezuelan entry into that integration scheme in view of Chávez's radical positions in terms of free commerce, foreign investment, domestic anti-democratic measures, and the escalation of aggressive statements against Colombia, raising winds of war. Brazil, Peru and Chile –in addition to Spain– have always been willing to propose diplomatic solutions and avoid a real confrontation at any cost.
- h) Colombia will always resort to multilateral venues (UN, OAS, UNASUR) keeping up with its tradition in foreign policy, instead of responding proportionally to Venezuela's provocations. Colloquially speaking, “it takes two to make a war” and Colombia is not willing to play the “hen game”. This means: Two parties confront each other in order to show their bravery with the risk of firing the first bullet until one of them withdraws in the last minute and gets labeled as a “coward”. Even during the Uribe era, which is characterized by a verbal diplomatic offensive against the neighboring Venezuela, the Colombian government never attempted to second the borderline provoking game by encouraging the geographical proximity between rival armed forces.⁷
- i) The Venezuelan public opinion concerning Colombia is severely disillusioned by its Head of State's performance, and does not pay much attention to his armed conflict insinuations, to such extent that most of Venezuelans themselves –eight out of ten– rejected the possibility of a declared war against Colombia, according to the results of a survey held by the private organization Datanálisis⁸.
- j) Both governments and their respective security and defense orientations, have more concerns and variables regarding domestic than external instability that may as well be attributable to the assumed or proved support by a neighboring government. Their priorities are essentially domestic and nowadays do not have sufficient internal potential to be morally and ideologically bonding, materially sustainable and executable to represent the risk of a proper international confrontation.

- k) A declared and weakly justified war against Colombia undermines Venezuela's international credibility, places it in frontal conflict position with the international system based on International Public Law and on the UN Foundational Chart's principles, also facing a resolute Security Council intervention. A positive military action contradicts the spirit that drives both UNASUR and the South-American Defense Council, where Venezuela is an integral part and for which it has encouraged the extension of its binding and effective institutional scope.
- l) According to the foundational State and society principles, due to the arrangements in the electoral system, and to the advantages of remaining in the States' "club" which is officially and commonly acknowledged as "democratic" –even if they resort to the "ism" suffixes (Chavism, Uribism, or an eventual "Santism") appended to their 2nd last name– Venezuela cannot conduct an assault on Colombia. It could not do it even if it would obtain convincing evidence that would prove the assumed conspiracy concerted among the CIA, the DAS, and the paramilitary forces; in that case, it must resort to the legitimate international venues, such as the International Court of Justice. It would be politically less expensive to join the Ecuadorian strategy which consists in filing international complaints against the Colombian anomalous conducts, rather than to resort to commercial, diplomatic or warfare de facto retaliation.
- m) The CDS's implementation in 2010, ratified by nine of its members, and the future application of Measures to Foster Confidence and Security (MFCS), in addition to the introduction of a "South American Peace Protocol", will be decisive in order to avoid a new bilateral armed confrontation rumor. The MFCSs would allow a permanent information exchange on domestic equipping, defense policies and subscribed military cooperation agreements, and will open cooperation doors on usually sensitive defense issues, thus contributing to reduce risk perceptions and dissipate the distrust regarding eventual conflicts⁹.

The Beginning of the Santos' Administration Face to Face with the Two Andean Countries: Realism and Pragmatic Co-Existence.

Surprisingly, and in an independent manner, the Santos' Administration has initiated an intensive diversification task as to its foreign relations without leaving the US unattended, –aiming to the FTA ratification in that country, and supporting continued anti-drug cooperation–, not only reassuming the disrupted or unattended diplomatic relations, but approaching emerging powers such as Brazil and China with great interest. An attempt to recover the neighboring and multi-topic integration relations within the Andean region is also gradually becoming evident, even before his official assumption –since August 2009. Santos' current pragmatism contrasts with his prior obstinate position during his office as Secretary of Defense, as he continuously reported the links between the FARC and the administrations of Presidents Correa and Chávez. Even though the proceedings against Colombia filed by Ecuador at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CIDH) are still pending, and despite of the fact that discordances between Venezuela and the US have increased due to the rejection of new US ambassador Larry Palmer in the unfortunate statements made regarding the scarcely democratic regime, Santos and the Chancellor's Office seem to be making their best effort

to provide a dialogical treatment to topics of high sensitiveness, politicization and controversy with their neighbors.

Since mid-2009, approximating actions and dialogs between the chancellors of Colombia and Ecuador began to be re-encouraged, resulting in positive determinations, such as the reactivation of the Combifron and the establishment of three special commissions: the first one concerns issues regarding cross-border crime and subversive groups; the second one was created for the development of border communities and humanitarian assistance, and the last one for sensitive issues, like the international lawsuits filed and the domestic litigation regarding the bombing issue (Benítez, Celi, and Jácome, 2010, p. 10). Recovering confidence is another core issue and, therefore, Colombia decided to share the information that it found in the FARC's hard disks during that operation, as well as the details about that military action with Ecuador. Currently, and following Ecuador's various requests, proposals to develop an overall scheme of action on co-responsibility basis in order to address the displaced persons issue and to support the returning Colombian refugees in Ecuador¹⁰ have emerged. In exchange, Ecuador has recently insisted on its good disposition to fight drug traffic and not allow the entry or stay of Colombian armed groups, revealing the destruction of 125 FARC camps in its territory during 2010¹¹. As to the Latin American integration, since September of last year, Ecuador exploited its temporary UNASUR chairmanship and encouraged the Congress of Colombia to ratify the Constituent Treaty, expecting it to pass the Constitutional Court; the Colombian government committed to support the proceeding.

Once Santos was elected President of Colombia, there has been no display of indifference between Colombia and Venezuela. Opened dialogs were already revived between both heads of state, resulting in a five-item bilateral work agenda for the improvement of commercial and political relations supported by bilateral commissions (Benítez, Celi, and Jácome, 2010, pp. 12-13). First: the discussion of outstanding debts and the improvement of commercial relations. Second: the suggestion for the creation of economical complementation mechanisms, to replace what got lost after Venezuela's exit of the CAN. Third: Jointly developing social and productive projects for the borderline communities. Fourth: developing a shared infrastructure, including the possibility that an exit to the Pacific Ocean may be granted by Colombia to Venezuela. Fifth: discussing security issues with a prudent, somewhat reserved, diplomatic posture, including sensitive issues, such as border protection, and the shared rejection and combat of illegal armed groups. However, there are some highly sensitive topics which remain unsolved, such as Colombia's demands regarding Venezuela's (and Ecuador's) explicit commitment to reject and fight the FARC with specific cooperation mechanisms and – in this regard, Colombia seeks to be an influencing party on the CDS direction – to refrain from intervening in its domestic conflict in favor of “negotiated” alternatives with the FARC and to accomplish the verification tool's introduction through the OAS or the UNASUR, with which Colombia could prove the existence of FARC camps in Venezuela and Ecuador. At present, and with the intention of initiating his government with the regained neighboring relations, Santos seems to be determined to freeze those issues, as well as to postpone the extension of military cooperation with the US, on which he persistently insisted considering the rumors about war with Venezuela.

Therefore, the foreign action of Santos' administration outlines new orientation contours pertaining to the Colombian foreign policy, whose strategic objective is aimed to a geographical and topical diversification. The world has changed in the last decade, and makes progress toward a polygon structure, as the result of the new formation of alliances, such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) and IBAS (India, Brazil and South Africa), in whose creation Brazil, as an emerging power, has played a key role. Consequently, Colombia is acquiring awareness of the emergence of a new power balance that, in the end, will be outlining a new world order, in which Latin America, and especially South America, will have to find its place.

It won't mean a total disruption of relations with the US. It rather means the search for a balance in Colombia's foreign relations that reduces the extreme vulnerability caused to the country by an excessive topic and geographic concentration on the US during the last eight years, as well as its controversial unconditional alignment to North American foreign policy. With a realistic view and a pragmatic attitude, as an expression of an identity of its own and of true national interests, the ideologization of Colombian relations with the world is beginning to be a part of the past.

Latin America is to Colombia the geographic, cultural and historical scenario for the development of its international relations. Therefore, it is positive that the Latin American neighborhood starts to play a core role within the new Colombian foreign policy context, where relations with the region are beginning to originate due to conviction more than obligation. In this regard, what could be called the new South American foreign policy strategy of President Santos' administration emerges, clearly expressed through its active and constructive participation in the UNASUR, and the recent announcement that indicates the start of the Colombian negotiations, supported by Brazil, to be accepted as a MERCOSUR member.

In conclusion, a geographical diversification begins to be noticed in Colombia's foreign policy re-orientation; it construes the geopolitical and geo-economic potentials offered by its binding neighbors, in whose intertwining a possible strategic association with Brazil begins to emerge.

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Summary

Most of the article develops a reflection on security conflicts, tensions and dilemmas that emerged during the Uribe era (2002-2010), between Colombia and its neighbors: Ecuador and Venezuela. Within this context, sensitive issues are highlighted, such as the repudiation of the latter to the military strategy of the Uribe administration and the Colombia Plan. Then, the different militarist approaches to domestic and bilateral security dilemmas are compared, outlined by different threat perceptions and the search for regional prestige and domestic loyalties. Subsequently an analysis on how the ambiguous nature of its foreign policy strategies systematically led to erode the peaceful neighborhood is presented. At last, the pragmatism that marks the beginning of the Santos' era in Colombia is highlighted, thus creating favorable conditions to provide a diplomatic treatment to sensitive topics and even revive stagnant integration processes.

Endnotes

- ¹ In the past, Chávez resorted to three Enabling Laws as presidential decrees with “lawful rank, strength and value” approved in 1999, 2000-2001 and 2007-2008, applicable to any national interest subject, including National Defense and Security issues. See: “Get to Know the Details of an Enabling Law” (Conozca los Detalles de una Ley Habilitante). December 14, 2010. Note of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV, as per its acronym in Spanish). In: <http://www.psuv.org.ve>
- ² Official Notice available on the website of the Ecuadorian Air Force (FAE, as per its acronym in Spanish). December 15, 2010. In: <http://www.fuerzaaereaecuatoriala.mil.ec>
- ³ See: “Uribe considered sending troops to Venezuela to capture FARC leaders” (Uribe barajó enviar tropas a Venezuela para capturar a jefes de las FARC). December 13, 2010. In: <http://www.eluniverso.com>
- ⁴ By the end of 2009, according to estimations of the National Government submitted in 2010, the FARC and the ELN had been reduced to approximately 9,500 members allocated in both groupings, after having reached a maximum of 20,000 men in the FARC and 4,000 in the ELN by 2002, in addition to achieve a reduction of kidnappings by around 92%. See: “The FARC and the ELN have less than 10.000 members, according to the Secretary of Defense” (FARC y ELN tienen menos de 10.000 integrantes, según Mindefensa). July 25, 2010. www.eldiario.com.co
- ⁵ However, a drop experienced by the Colombian exports to Venezuela in 2009 (approx. 33.5%) and to Ecuador (approx. 16.1%) cannot be exclusively explained by the political variable, since the global crisis of the consumer markets also influenced a sale loss to the US (8.35% approx.). See: “Strong drop of regional exports to Venezuela” (Fuerte caída de exportaciones regionales a Venezuela). February 23, 2010. In: <http://www.dinero.com>
- ⁶ Variation figures from 2009 to 2010 show both a drop in the bilateral commerce between Colombia and Venezuela and China’s positioning as a second preferred partner of the Bolivarian country. See the overall export & import statistics per destination of the Venezuelan National Statistics Institute: <http://www.ine.gov.ve>
- ⁷ Uribe Vélez’s government always tried to avoid skirmishes and force struggles with Venezuela, despite the roughness of its discourses. See news like: “Colombia disregards troops’ movement at the borderline with Venezuela” (Colombia descarta movimiento de tropas en la frontera con Venezuela). July 22, 2010. In: <http://www.semana.com>
- ⁸ The sample included only 1,299 Venezuelans, but was able to reflect the opinion of most of the communications mass media that expressed their rejection at that time to Hugo Chávez’s decision to mobilize his troops and heavy weaponry toward the Colombian border. See notes like: “Venezuelans reject war against Colombia, a survey reveals” (Venezolanos rechazan guerra con Colombia, revela encuesta). November 10, 2009. In: <http://venezuelaaldia.com>
- ⁹ See official note of the agency: “The CDS developed an unprecedented procedure to apply Measures of Confidence” (CDS desarrolló procedimiento inédito para aplicar Medidas de Confianza). November 30, 2010. In: <http://www.cdsunasur.org/es/prensa/noticias/459>.
- ¹⁰ See: “Correa and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will study the status of Colombian refugees in Ecuador” (Correa y ACNUR estudiarán estado de refugiados colombianos en Ecuador). December 19, 2010. In: <http://www.eltiempo.com>
- ¹¹ “125 FARC camps were dismantled in 2010 in Ecuador”. In: <http://m.eltiempo.com/politica>