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Peru Reestablishes Diplomatic Relations with Venezuela

by LADB Staff
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Peruvian President Alan Garcia has made conciliatory gestures toward Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, apparently ending an ongoing conflict between the two executives. In December, the two presidents publicly reconciled their war of words and in January returned their ambassadors to the other country's capital city. Diplomatic relations had been cut off since April 2006 when a conflict erupted between Chavez and former Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006).

Official contacts between Peru and Venezuela were limited to business and trade. South American summit the scene of reconciliation "The two of us are well-mannered and cordial people, so any kind of argument, any previously made statements, remain a closed chapter, " Garcia told Peru's Radioprogramas from Cochabamba, Bolivia, where the second South American summit (Cumbre Suramerica de Naciones, CSN) was held Dec. 9-10. He said that he felt "good chemistry" with Chavez.

As South American leaders explored creating a South American community similar to the European Union (EU), Garcia kept the good vibrations going by making nice with leaders of Venezuela and Ecuador. Garcia, who won the presidency in June, embraced and shook hands with Chavez whom several months ago he had called a "historic loser" with "psychological problems." Their row started in the first half of 2006, when Chavez called Garcia a thief, liar, and lapdog of Washington and openly endorsed Garcia's campaign opponent, Ollanta Humala.

Chavez later suggested that Garcia's victory was the result of fraud. Garcia in return accused Chavez of using Venezuela's immense oil wealth to buy influence across Latin America. Chavez's comments on the Peruvian election and his open endorsement of nationalist candidate Humala in January 2006 led Peru's government to recall its ambassador from Caracas (see NotiSur, 2006-01-27). Toledo recalled Peru's ambassador shortly after Chavez referred to Toledo and Garcia as "alligators from the same water hole."

Garcia won the presidential race partly by depicting Humala as a pawn of Chavez. A war of words between President Chavez and then candidate Garcia exploded, further straining Venezuela-Peru relations (see NotiSur, 2006-06-16). Regional relations were also strained because of the embrace by Peru and Colombia of free-trade agreements (FTAs) with the US, leading Chavez to withdraw Venezuela from the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN) trading bloc (see NotiSur, 2006-06-23).

Garcia's status as an avid free-trader, similar to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, puts him at odds with Chavez, who calls himself a Bolivarian socialist.

Energy cooperation agenda

But, at the CSN meeting, the two were positively chummy, according to the Associated Press. The public display of friendly interpersonal relations was followed one month later with the
announcement of the formal re-establishment of diplomatic ties. "I have spoken with Hugo Chavez. We will re-establish diplomatic relations within one month, sending our ambassadors," Garcia said Jan. 15. He said the two nations, which since May had maintained relations through the commercial sections of their embassies, would also discuss cooperation in the energy sector.

Chavez confirmed that the ambassadors would be back in place within a month and said that he had agreed with Garcia "to work on the issue of petroleum and gas to seek integration" in the region. Ecuador and Peru seek to cultivate better relations Later the same day in Peru, Ecuador's President-elect Rafael Correa, speaking to reporters at the presidential palace where he met with Garcia, said his country's relations with Peru were their best ever.

The 1995 border war between the Ecuador and Peru over their Amazon boundary appeared a fading memory (see NotiSur, 1995-02-10, 1995-04-28). "Ecuadorian-Peruvian relations are at their best moment in history, but we still have a lot to do," Correa said before dining with Garcia. "We are here to build not only peace but community among Ecuador, Peru, and all Latin American peoples."

Both presidents had just come from the Bolivia summit. Correa, who won Ecuador's presidency in a runoff Nov. 26, said Peru and Ecuador must work to mend wounds caused by the long-running border dispute, which was ended with an October 1998 treaty. "We've achieved the absence of war, but we haven't achieved peace," Correa said, adding that Ecuador's border areas have been devastated since Ecuador adopted the US dollar as its currency.

On Dec. 10, Correa reiterated that he would not sign a bilateral FTA with the US, saying it could create "incalculable" damage for Ecuador since the country cannot control its currency's value. "We don't have a national currency, we have the dollar," he told Radioprogramas. "If, as a result of the agreement, Peru and Colombia have a problem in the external sector, they reduce the currency's value and correct the imbalance. Ecuador can't do that, and the consequences could be incalculable."

Bolivian President Evo Morales and Chilean President Michelle Bachelet also used the summit to further diplomatic ties between their countries, strained ever since Chile seized Bolivia's Pacific coast during an 1879 war. The two presidents met in a closed-door session to continue discussions regarding Bolivia's demand for sovereign maritime access.

No agreements were announced, but afterward Morales happily cited recent opinion surveys showing that both nations' citizens were warming to their historical rival. Peru's regional relations continue to be problematic regarding its ongoing disagreement with Chile on maritime rights along their marine border (see NotiSur, 2005-11-18).

**Who's licking whose wounds?**

In November, Peru's Foreign Minister Jose Garcia Belaunde had said Chavez "should lick his wounds," referring to the "defeats" he had suffered in the region, "because the defeats have been many in [the course of] very little time: Peru, Ecuador and the United Nations." At the time, political analysts incorrectly believed that conservative billionaire businessman Alvaro Noboa was the front runner in the upcoming election in Ecuador and that Venezuela's push to win a seat on the
UN Security Council had failed as the US pushed Guatemala as its pick for the Latin American representative to the body.

Panama ultimately won as the compromise candidate (see NotiSur, 2006-11-10 and NotiCen, 2006-10-26 and 2006-11-09). Since Belaunde’s remarks, Correa won the Ecuadoran election with a huge margin as did Chavez in his own re-election drive (see NotiSur, 2006-12-08 and 2006-12-15).

The week Belaunde made his remark, Chavez ally Daniel Ortega won the presidential race in Nicaragua. Thus, the interval between Belaunde’s advice and the Peru-Venezuela reconciliation marked a period of domestic and regional strengthening for Chavez and populist-democratic governments.

Columnists Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) and Robert Naiman of Just Foreign Policy argued that the major US media's analysis is that "a number of inter-American conflicts among Latin American countries (Bolivia with Brazil and Argentina over natural gas, Venezuela with Peru and Mexico, Uruguay and Argentina) would overwhelm any attempts at Latin American unity as a counterweight to the United States' historically powerful influence in the region.

Chavez was portrayed as a particularly divisive influence. The summit in Cochabamba indicates that the trends toward increasing regional co-operation, political independence, and economic integration are still growing." Naiman and Weisbrot claimed that the US strategy to "isolate" Venezuela from its neighbors "took another hit" at the CSN meeting where Garcia and Chavez reconciled. [Sources: El Universal (Venezuela), 12/04/06, 12/05/06; Associated Press, 10/11/06, 12/09/06; La Republica (Peru), 11/09/06, 11/13/06; www.huffingtonpost.com, 12/11/06; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 10/11/06, 10/24/06, 11/13/06, 01/16/07; The Miami Herald, 10/11/06, 01/16/07; www.telesur.tv.net, 11/09/06, 01/21/07]

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