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UNASUR Reveals More Weaknesses than Strengths

by LADB Staff

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The future of the Union de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) seems to be that of an entity without much weight in Latin American geopolitics, since there are no common guidelines motivating the countries to work for its immediate consolidation. UNASUR was more a response to demagogic discourse than a real interest in creating an organization that unifies Latin American nations.

In November 2007, its first secretary-general, former Ecuadoran President Rodrigo Borja (1988-1992), expressed his doubts about the efficacy of the new regional bloc. "UNASUR is on the road to becoming a new source of bureaucracies and budgets because it will not achieve concrete and quantifiable results in integration matters," said Borja upon resigning from the UNASUR leadership in May 2008.

Similarly, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa called for a change in the founding statutes of UNASUR, since, he said, the statutes as presented would not contribute to integration. Despite the criticism, Correa signed the document with the promise that modifications would be made to facilitate real South American integration, but this commitment remains unfulfilled.

Tensions between and among countries create obstacles

The first criticisms of UNASUR were followed by a series of disagreements so serious that the mere election of a new secretary-general in December 2008 rekindled the animosity between some delegations, and Uruguay threatened to withdraw if former Argentine President Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) was elected secretary-general.

Trade interests and existing asymmetries in the South American countries are the principal stumbling blocks for total integration, since MERCOSUR, led by Brazil and Argentina, wants to impose its commercial interests on the other countries. Venezuela, with influence in some Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN) countries, also wants to lead the integration process, in keeping with its strengths in the energy area. If the regional blocs' trade barriers were not enough, new obstacles have arisen with the individual initiatives of countries that are moving away from regional trade and prefer trade agreements with the US and Europe, like Chile, Peru, and Colombia.

Other countries have unilaterally put safeguards on an extensive list of products to protect their domestic industries and the "hard currency that began to dry up because of the global financial crisis," such as Ecuador, which has restricted trade with its neighbors on more than 1,300 products. To complicate the situation further, problems on the Colombia-Ecuador border led to a break in diplomatic relations between the two countries, following Colombia's bombing of a Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) camp in Ecuadoran territory (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07).

More recently, the Colombian government's decision to allow US troops to use its military bases threw more fuel onto the fire (see NotiSur, 2009-07-31). In this situation, the South American presidents agreed to meet in Quito, Ecuador, on Aug. 10, taking advantage of President Correa's invitation to attend his investiture for a second term. At the meeting, Ecuador became president pro tem of UNASUR.

The tense diplomatic situation and the request by various UNASUR countries that Colombia explain the scope of the agreement that it is negotiating with the US, which will allow that country to use seven Colombian military bases to monitor the region, provoked a reaction from the Colombian government. It announced that it would not attend the meeting, and, at the same time, it questioned the choice of Correa to lead UNASUR. "Ecuador's taking over as president pro tem of the Union de Naciones Suramericanas could lead to the regional organization's failure because of the tensions that it maintains with Colombia," said Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos.

US: The elephant in the room

The meeting in Quito took place without Presidents Alvaro Uribe of Colombia or Alan Garcia of Peru, both seen as allies of US policy. Both countries have negotiated free-trade agreements (FTAs) with the US and are in similar processes with the European Union (EU). Without their presence, the issues dealt with at the Quito meeting were not momentous and were limited to a series of diplomatic statements, most notably the denunciation of the military coup that ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, although the statement did not specify concrete actions to pressure for his return to power (see NotiCen, 2009-08-13). \

Faced with the evident failure of the Quito meeting, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva called for a new UNASUR meeting, and this time he proposed two concrete issues for discussion: to analyze relations with the US, for which he proposed setting up a meeting between UNASUR and US President Barack Obama, and to analyze the imminent military agreement between Colombia and the US.

The governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have expressed their unequivocal opposition to the installation of US military bases in Colombia, arguing that this would strengthen Uribe's bellicose policies. In that regard, Lula will try to ease the tension at the next meeting, to be held in Argentina, but he points out that it is necessary to discuss the military issue since the US is still interfering in the internal affairs of various countries in the region.

Lula says that the few advances achieved and the existing climate of confrontation threaten the future of regional integration. "We are going to have to come to an agreement regarding UNASUR's future because we need to have a cordial relationship among ourselves, a level of trust and sincerity among us," said Lula.

The Colombian government has indicated that it might attend a future UNASUR meeting, but it insists that signing a military agreement with the US is "a sovereign act." The US military bases have become a highly sensitive political issue and have forced the US to clarify its role in Colombia. "We have said very clearly that we are not creating or establishing any bases in Colombia. We are

working with our Colombian partner to try to deal with a problem in the hemisphere, which is drug traffic," said State Department deputy spokesperson Robert Wood.

Wood's explanation does not convince Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who says the agreement could "set off a war in South American," nor does it convince Bolivian President Evo Morales, who accuses the US of using the military bases "to halt the revolutionary processes taking shape in America."

The initial difficulties and those that have arisen in the short three years of this new South American integration process make it clear that its consolidation will not be easy, and current circumstances even indicate that it is not a viable process. Although theoretically necessary for regional development, UNASUR has many more weaknesses than strengths, which is what, in the long term, is leading it toward failure.

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