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Andrés Gaudán

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UNASUR Comes into its Own, Sets Example of Latin American Diplomacy

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Region
Published: Friday, January 7, 2011

Within a month, several notable achievements of Latin American diplomacy, spearheaded by the 12-member Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), positioned the region as a world leader in democratic liberties, human rights, sovereignty, and the struggle against racism, discrimination, and xenophobia.

The events began Nov. 26, when the 12 heads of state from the UNASUR countries met in Georgetown, the capital of the former British colony of Guyana. A week later, the site was Mar del Plata, Argentina, where the XX Cumbre Iberoamericana included representatives from 28 Latin American countries plus Spain and Portugal. The final meeting, in the Brazilian city of Foz de Iguaçu on Dec. 17, brought together the presidents of the four Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) plus the four associate members (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Peru).

In addition to the meetings' accomplishments, the three summits seemed to underscore the notion that the controversial Organization of American States (OAS) has been superseded by a new diplomatic dynamic that could mark the end of the heyday of the OAS, created during the Cold War years at US insistence.

The UNASUR summit set the pace for the subsequent meetings. In May 2008, when Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, Uruguay, and Venezuela formed UNASUR—an idea put forth by the late Argentine President Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007), Brazil's former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez—it was, in the opinion of many, overly ambitious (NotiSur, May 30, 2008). Others dismissed it, saying it duplicated already existing organizations such as the OAS.

UNASUR emerges as OAS alternative

Thirty months later, in Georgetown, UNASUR appeared as a powerful entity capable of, in just one summit, achieving three significant accomplishments. First, members signed the democracy protocol (Protocolo de Compromiso con la Democracia), which is intended to serve as a deterrent for any attempted coup against any member country. Second, they set up a finance council (Consejo Suramericano de Economía y Finanzas) to design new financial engineering to protect the region from "vulture funds." Third, members agreed to a coordinated defense of Argentine sovereignty regarding the Islas Malvinas (Falklands), a strategic southern archipelago where Great Britain still practices its colonial policy as if the clock of history had stopped in the early 18th century.

"In a world overpopulated with agencies that generally do not fulfill the objectives for which they were created, UNASUR became very useful and, in addition, laid bare the ineffectiveness of the OAS, an entity that since its creation has operated at the service of US interests," Kirchner said last October a few days before he died.
"It is likely that UNASUR has dealt the OAS the definitive death blow, and we Latin Americans from the south have led that necessary crusade," said Bolivian President Evo Morales at the end of the Georgetown summit.

The OAS was created in 1948 almost as a US agency to control the countries in its geographic sphere of influence, and it provided its greatest services in the tense years of the Cold War with the former Soviet Union. It has always been criticized from all sectors in terms similar to Kirchner's, especially for having legitimized US military interventions that toppled various constitutional governments in the region.

**Unified stance to thwart coups**

The Protocolo de Compromiso con la Democracia came to fruition in less than two months. It was conceived on Sept. 30, 2010, when UNASUR held an emergency meeting to adopt common actions in the wake of the attempted coup against Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010). It calls for automatic sanctions in the case of a break in the democratic order in any country in the region. The menu of actions begins with closing borders and suspending air and sea traffic as well as trade, communications, and the provision of energy, goods, and services.

"We are sending a strong message so that anyone who attempts to take over a government through a coup understands that they will be met with absolute isolation," said Correa.

The OAS has its Democratic Charter, which deals with coup situations, but it differs significantly from the UNASUR Protocolo. The charter does not establish economic sanctions nor does it foresee isolating de facto governments; instead it promotes dialogue between conflicting sides—the democratic and constitutional government and the coup sectors—as equal parties. In addition, the Protocolo will be executed at the request of the affected government, while the OAS Democratic Charter relies on the OAS General Assembly to determine whether it is advisable to call for a dialogue between the two sides.

"The coup in Honduras—which was dealt with by the OAS and ended with the displacement of a legitimate and democratic government (NotiCen, July 2, 2009)—to allow the takeover by another of spurious origins—and the attempted coup in Ecuador—which was dealt with by UNASUR and ended with the re-establishment of the constitutional government—show that the defense of democracy should be a collective action and that the path chosen by the South American countries is the only correct one," said Ecuadoran Carlos Espinosa, coordinator of the Área de Relaciones Internacionales of the Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ).

**Stance on vulture funds, Argentine claim to Malvinas**

The decision regarding vulture funds—special situations funds in the language of the markets, financial piracy according to economists in countries that suffer their effects—shows that "UNASUR regards with extreme concern" the risks that financial speculators bring to the region. Thus, it charged the newly created economic council with drawing up measures and recommendations to minimize the adverse effects of those funds. (Vulture or pirate funds invest in the debt of a private entity that is considered weak or in sovereign debt of countries in crisis, buying devalued bonds to then demand full repayment of principal and interest. South America has many examples of this type of action.)
The summit concluded with a strong declaration of support for Argentine sovereignty regarding the Malvinas. The 12 countries adopted a measure to prevent ships flying the "illegal flag of the Islas Malvinas (Falklands)" from entering their ports. Here it is worth noting that the UNASUR countries include Guyana, a former British colony and member of the British Commonwealth. For the first time, Guyana questioned the policy of the ancient colonial power in territory not its own and joined politically with the South American bloc.

The declaration also commits member countries to inform Argentina "regarding ships and naval artifacts [exploration platforms] with projected courses that include the islands and carry cargo destined for illegal oil or mineral activities on the Argentine continental shelf."

The insistence on citing oil vessels or ships with cargo to be used for oil-related activities is a strong move by the region—the first—in a joint defense of its natural resources. Some 60 billion barrels of oil lie beneath the islands, and Great Britain decided unilaterally to give exploitation concessions to four firms from various countries: Desire Petroleum, Shell, Rockhopper, and Falkland Oil and Gas.

Uruguay has already denied access to its ports—the closest to the Malvinas—to ships with any flag that carry oil-activity materials toward the islands. In the year of the bicentennial of most South American countries' independence from the Spanish crown, the other countries in the region took UNASUR's example and expanded on it.

Other organizations follow suit

At the behest of the 12 UNASUR countries, the Cumbre Iberoamericana accepted the UNASUR agreements and adopted as its own the Protocolo Democrático and the support for Argentina's claims to the Malvinas. For the first time, the South Americans imposed their agenda on the rest of the region and on the former Iberian colonial powers—Spain and Portugal.

The presidential-level MERCOSUR meeting in Foz de Iguazu deliberated with the same spirit, and what was always defined as a trade bloc surprisingly adopted an Estatuto de Ciudadanía defining political and social measures that they commit to bring to UNASUR. The measures include "creating a regional area of free circulation of people, respecting the internal legislation of the receiving countries and in accordance with the full exercise of the rights of migrants and their families [to work, health care, and education], irrespective of their nationality, migratory status, ethnic origin, gender, sexual identity, or any other discriminatory consideration."

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