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Venezuela and Colombia Mend Diplomatic, Trade Fences

by Andrés Gaudín

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With the signing of a panoply of economic and strategic accords, and without any reference to the serious problems that have plagued bilateral relations in the last three years, Colombia and Venezuela put an end to the last flashpoint of tension in the region.

In late November, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos visited Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, and, after just 10 hours of a dialogue prepared discretely by diplomats from both countries, they reached a series of understandings that returned relations to their level in the best moments in the two South American countries' history. More than merely closing the harmful chapter, the presidents made it clear that no real reasons existed for the estrangement, and they cleared the way for embarking on major undertakings together. The two presidents also sent strong signals to their people and, in particular, limited the offensive of their respective political opposition, both domestic and foreign.

Perhaps as important was the message sent to the region, showing that two presidents with conflicting ideological roots can not only dialogue and make good business deals but also take far-reaching steps in favor of integration and peaceful co-existence.

Santos and Chávez proposed resuming the common history that their two countries had built through two centuries of independence and that Colombia’s ultraright ex-President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2008) destroyed in only eight years in office, especially after September 2008.

FTA will boost trade ties

The presidents signed various cooperation agreements, including a type of free-trade agreement (FTA) that sets preferential import tariffs on nearly 3,500 products. The goal is to resume the level of trade in which Colombia always had a trade surplus—in excess of US$7 billion in 2007, only to drop to just over US$500 million after three years of strained relations.

The tariff-preferences agreement replaced the regimen in effect until 2008 for both countries as signatories of the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN) protocols. Venezuela had withdrawn from CAN in April 2006, although it maintained its rights and obligations until last April. At that time, the Chávez administration justified its decision saying that it was a form of protest for the FTA that Uribe was negotiating with the US (NotiSur, May 5, 2006, and June 23, 2006). It is worth noting that, paradoxically, the presidents are re-establishing relations little more than a month after the US Congress, after a four-year delay, gave the green light to the FTA with Bogotá (NotiSur, Dec. 2, 2011).

Those are, essentially, the trade agreements reached. But other aspects of the meeting were substantially more important. First, Santos got Venezuela to agree to finance much of the construction of a new power plant some of whose energy will go to Venezuela. Second, Santos agreed to the sale, within six months, of 50,000 head of cattle that Venezuela will use to improve its stock, as it is doing with cattle imported from Argentina and Uruguay. Third, the energy agreements will also affect the Colombian state oil company Ecopetrol, which will be assigned two
areas for exploitation in the "mature fields" of the Venezuelan border departments of Apure and Zulia.

**Pipeline from Venezuela to Colombia's coast worries US**

However, of the 11 protocols signed by the presidents, the most far-reaching was the one creating a mixed agency to carry out feasibility studies prior to construction of an oil pipeline of more than 2,000 km that will join Venezuela's Franja del Orinoco—one of the world's major oil reserves—with Colombia's Pacific port of Tumaco.

The initiative is vital for Venezuela, and Santos knows it. It would allow Caracas to double its oil exports to China by 2014, from the current 500,000 barrels per day to 1 million bpd. It has already silenced Chávez's internal opposition and the US government, both of whom see a great danger in the strong trade relations being developed between Venezuela and China.

Both presidents referred to the issue, which so frightens Chávez's domestic and foreign enemies, giving it the importance it deserves. "A pipeline with these characteristics awakens the interest of the entire world," said Santos. "How much will we save when we have the pipeline from here, crossing Colombia?" asked Chávez, noting that ships carrying Venezuelan crude to China or Japan now have to travel thousands of kilometers farther, rounding Africa to get to Asia.

**New relationship benefits both Santos and Chávez**

It could be said that, starting in 2002, relations between Colombia and Venezuela became relations between two people: Uribe and Chávez, one on the extreme right and the other who calls himself socialist, two personalities as strong as they are unpredictable. In April 2002, when the electoral campaign that brought Uribe to power ended, an attempted coup took place in Venezuela. Chávez was thrown out of office and detained for just over a day at a military base. Uribe celebrated that event (NotiSur, April 19, 2002). Since then, Chávez has accused him of being a "servant of imperialism," alluding to the US. In 2006, Chávez withdrew Venezuela from CAN and blamed Uribe, for the same reason.

The verbal confrontation continued escalating and, in March 2008, when Colombian troops entered Ecuadoran territory to pursue and kill Raúl Reyes (NotiSur, March 7, 2008), a leader of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Chávez (Venezuela) broke off diplomatic relations with Uribe (Colombia).

From then until the end of his second term in August 2010, Uribe was increasingly critical of Chávez, accusing him of turning Venezuela into a sanctuary for guerrillas and drug traffickers. Uribe threatened to ask the Organization of American States (OAS) to expel Venezuela, although he never presented any proof or formalized a petition for expulsion (NotiSur, Nov. 20, 2009, and Aug. 6, 2010). The alleged Colombian-guerrilla camps in Venezuela were never found. As for drug traffickers, Venezuela has detained them at an average rate of one every two months and has always summarily extradited them to Colombia or the US. The latest was the great "gift" with which Chávez received Santos on Nov. 28: the announcement of the detention and imminent extradition of Maximiliano "El Valenciano" Bonilla, the most important Colombian drug lord still at large.

With all that background, the crowning of this first meeting with the signing of such important agreements is a political achievement for Chávez and for Santos. For Chávez, because, by consolidating relations with someone who only 18 months ago appeared on the horizon almost as
an enemy, he has sent a strong message to the US and silenced the internal opposition that, for now, reaps more foreign than domestic support. For Santos, because it allows him to bolster his image as a statesman in a region that looked on him with distrust—when he was defense minister, he was seen as a hawk among hawks—and because it gives him the opportunity to put distance, perhaps definitively, between himself and Uribe and to mend fences with his largest trade partner on the continent.

Santos and Chávez took on an agenda that both defined with the same word: decisive. "Today security, drug trafficking, trade, territorial sovereignty, culture, and everything that unites us will be discussed, although some want it to separate us, our two peoples," said Santos upon arriving in Caracas.

The two presidents both said that the meeting was occurring at a "very important" moment—another linguistic similarity, but not just that—for the process of regional integration. It came four days after the III Cumbre de Américas Latina y el Caribe (CALC) gave way to the birth of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), an OAS without the US and Canada.

After the exchange of greetings, Chávez announced the detention of Maximiliano Bonilla, and each word, carefully chosen, seemed to be directed to both the visitor and to the internal opposition—presidential elections take place in October 2012 and politics is the burning issue in Venezuela—and to the US government, which repeats that Venezuela is a sanctuary for Colombian drug traffickers and guerrillas.

"From no perspective have we allowed nor will we allow the violation of our sovereignty by any group, by any personality, whether from drug trafficking, the guerrillas, or whatever," he said, adding as the punch line, "We will do everything to prevent our territory from being used to conspire against or target Colombia."

The protocol of diplomatic speeches reserved the last word for Santos, who thanked Venezuela and also responded to Uribe, saying, "My friend Chávez, today we show the world that through collaboration we are going to obtain the best results."

Four days before Santos' trip to Caracas, Uribe, in receiving in Bogotá a delegation of the Venezuelan opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD), continued trying to interfere in bilateral relations, advising his guests to receive Santos with a statement of repudiation. He even told them that the Colombian president is "a useful fool for Venezuelan Marxism."

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