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Colombia v. Venezuela: An Endgame for the FARC?

Ray Walser, Ph.D.

On Friday, July 11, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe will meet Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in Caracas. The meeting will allow Chavez to put a smiley face on relations with neighboring Colombia. There will be *abrazos*—few since Chairman Khrushchev have doled out the hugs like Hugo. Both Chávez and Uribe will, presumably without their noses growing, speak of good relations between their nations.

Yet, behind this façade of Andean affection lies a heavy dose of diplomatic amnesia. Barely four months ago, the Colombians—operating just across the Ecuadorian border—eliminated Raul Reyes, second in command of the Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia (FARC). In the days following Reyes's death, President Chávez commanded his generals to dispatch tanks and troops to the border with Colombia.

Subsequently, Chávez, along with Presidents Correa of Ecuador and Ortega of Nicaragua, moved to sever relations with Colombia, seeking to transform Bogotá into an international pariah. Appearing before the Latin American presidents at the Rio Group in early March, a dignified but humbled President Uribe had little choice but to pledge not to attack the FARC when it sought sanctuary in safe havens outside of Colombia.

In response to President Uribe's concessions, Chávez personally excoriated the Colombian leader as “mafia” and a lapdog of U.S. imperialism. He praised Reyes as a good revolutionary and romanticized the FARC as cutting-edge, Bolivarian insurgents keen on driving Uribe and the U.S. out of

Colombia. Suddenly, Uribe's terrorists were reinvented as Chavez's freedom fighters.

How quickly things can change.

Keeping the FARC in Check. “Operation Checkmate,” the brilliantly executed July 2 rescue of 15 hostages—including high-profile captive Ingrid Betancourt, three American citizens, and 11 soldiers and police—was a brilliant triumph of intelligence, coordination, and deception. The audacious rescue casts an entirely different light on President Uribe, the Colombian government, and the FARC. Most Colombians reacted as if their nation had just won the World Cup, and Uribe now enjoys above 90 percent approval rating.

The only losers in this geopolitical chess move were the FARC and a handful of Colombian politicians—such as Senator Piedad Cordoba—whose reputations were scorched by too close an association with the FARC. The Colombian government has made it clear that the heartless jailors of the Americans and Ms. Betancourt are on the fast track for extradition to the U.S.

The events of the past few months have left the FARC reeling. The deaths of three of the FARC's leadership—including guerrilla legend Manuel

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Marulanda, aka “Sureshot”—has left the organization partially decapitated. The group is harried and hounded by an aggressive, increasingly confident Colombian military. Deprived of safe havens and logistical support, the FARC now slinks toward the borders. Cash to buy bullets and coca paste are increasingly in short supply.

As a result, is it any surprise over 2,000 FARC fighters deserted in 2007? After all, the FARC’s new intellectual leader, Alfonso Cano, and its ruthless war strategist “Mono Jojoy” must literally run through the Colombian jungle to survive.

Fork in the Road. The FARC is also isolated from political support, with approximately 97 percent of Colombians opposing the organization. The capture of computers belonging to Raul Reyes, whose contents were authenticated by Interpol, was akin to lifting a large boulder and exposing the slimy earth below; foreign support for the FARC was thrust into the harsh glare of international scrutiny.

Incapable of dealing a lethal military blow against the Uribe government, the FARC has reached the proverbial fork in the road. It can either resort to random but bloody terrorism—the Colombian military has recently discovered several caches of explosives—or it can look for an end-game scenario. For instance, the FARC can release the additional 700 hostages it holds and enter into serious peace talks, leading ultimately to a laying down of arms and a return to civilian life.

President Chávez’s change of heart in June—when he said the day of the guerrilla was over in Latin America—has not passed unnoticed. While not of the Saul on the Road to Damascus variety,

Chávez’s conversion certainly indicates a shift of political calculations.

The Fat Lady Is Warming Up. Regardless of his motives, Chávez has an opportunity to cease being the problem and become part of the solution by expelling the two senior FARC leaders who move freely throughout Venezuela. Quietly, Chávez can remove the welcome mat previously extended to FARC fighters and cease providing logistical support.

With slumping approval ratings, rising inflation and crime, and food shortages, Chávez must tend to the home fires. He can practice the non-interventionism he preaches and strengthen legitimate commercial ties with Colombia, which is increasingly a supplier of agricultural products to his poorly managed and shortage-ridden economy.

The Organization of American States—which recently urged the FARC to release its hostages and begin taking the path to peace—as well as the new Union of South American States (UNASUR) can help. Peace in Colombia and an end of the FARC as a criminal-terrorist army can be a beneficial situation for all of Latin America.

As for the U.S., robust funding for *Plan Colombia* and passage of the free trade deal with Colombia legislation are essential.

While the fat lady has not yet begun to sing, she may be warming up in a dressing room somewhere in Caracas.

—Ray Walser, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.