

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2982
August 13, 2010

Santos–Chávez Santa Marta Summit: A Moment of Promise and Peril in the Americas

Ray Walser, Ph.D.

The August 10 summit between newly inaugurated Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez is a potentially positive step in the Americas. The summit lowered tensions that were recently heightened when officials of the outgoing Uribe government presented evidence showing that an estimated 1,5000 fighters of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) are using sanctuaries in Venezuela. Presentation of the evidence before a special session of the Organization of American States led to Chávez's rupture of diplomatic ties with Colombia on July 22.

Sworn in on August 7, Santos told Colombians that in matters pertaining to national security, the door to peace with FARC and ELN is open. Yet, Santos stipulated, negotiations can begin only when those groups cease armed violence, kidnapping, narcotics trafficking, extortion, and intimidation. Santos expressed a determination to end illegal warfare against the people of Colombia "either by reason or by force." In short, Santos' vision of a more prosperous, more equitable, and more neighborly Colombia is linked to ending the scourge of narco-terrorism and insurgency. It is a modification—not an abandonment—of the democratic security policy of President Uribe.

Positive but Modest Summit Results. The summit underscored a hope for more stable and productive bilateral relations. Santos spoke of turning over a new page in Colombia–Venezuela relations. Chávez concurred.

The parties committed to restoring ambassadors and to a high-level ministerial before the end of August. They also agreed to establish several joint commissions to review commercial ties, social and infrastructure development, and security. The promised creation of a joint security commission, which has the potential to serve as a positive, confidence-building measure.

Chávez vowed that his government does not support FARC, a statement contradicted by fact but one Santos accepted. He categorically promised that he "will not permit the presence of guerrillas or terrorists on Venezuelan soil."

There were multiple factors driving the summit. Behind-the-scenes diplomacy by Argentina's ex-President Nestor Kirchner and others appeared to influence both parties. In the future, Santos will try harder to work within the security framework created by the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). His more flexible style and diplomatic manner may help prod UNASUR to address the critical issues of terrorism and illegal armed groups and make it less of a sounding board for Chávez's paranoia.

Economics are another important force influencing the summit. Colombia has lost billions because

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm2982>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

of Venezuela's politically motivated economic embargo, but Venezuela had also suffered market dislocation and seen inflation and scarcity rise. Santos sees improved trade ties as a unifying element.

Chávez, meanwhile, is looking toward the September 26 legislative elections. Threats of war with Colombia may play well to his hardcore supporters, but they worry the average Venezuelan who may be inclined to vote against Chávez's party, the Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela.

As long as Chávez plays along, President Santos has opted for pragmatism and quiet diplomacy.

The Ball Is in Chavez's Court. At the summit, Chávez made two significant commitments. First, he proclaimed his Bolivarian Revolution to be peaceful and therefore no threat to Colombia. Second, he promised that his government does not support FARC, ELN, or other illegally armed groups.

Bogotá and Washington are far too familiar with Chávez's challenging rhetoric and duplicitous behavior to accept mere promises without action. The bottom line is not whether Chávez will or will not admit to aiding FARC. He will not. But will he do something tangible about FARC and ELN, as well as the drug trafficking that sustains these groups? Will he permit the establishment of an effective mechanism of mutual verification or retreat behind the protective carapace of national sovereignty? Will he willingly apply political pressure on FARC in order to compel it to end the armed struggle on terms acceptable to Santos and the Colombian people? Or will he simply provide a smokescreen while FARC reorganizes?

A few amicable hours cannot paper over profound differences between Santos's Colombia and Chávez's Venezuela. Colombia is a democratic, market state with genuine separation of powers. It has an active and free press, a skilled and increasingly professional military, and a working alliance with the U.S. Colombia is in the process of strengthening the rule of law and essential institutions of responsible governance.

Building on the Uribe legacy, Santos commands the confidence of the Colombian people.

Venezuela is in the middle of a process of revolutionary transformation toward a socialist/commu-

nist society, deeply polarized with an economy in apparent disarray, and increasingly governed by an autocrat whose mentor is Fidel Castro, whose operating code is militaristic, and whose worldview is profoundly anti-American. An arms buildup, close ties to Iran, and the Havana–Caracas axis rightfully worry Colombia and other nations. Criminality and lawlessness are on the upswing and domestic and international confidence in Chávez is plummeting.

Clearly, the future of Colombia–Venezuela will depend on how FARC and ELN play their hand. Their readiness to engage in a real search for peace is doubtful. The August 11 car bombing in Bogotá may be a negative reply to Santos's offer to talk peace.

Back Santos with Active U.S. Diplomacy . President Santos displayed statesmanship by meeting Chávez. He knows the Obama Administration harbors mixed emotions toward his country. While the Administration supports close cooperation in the counter-drug and security arenas and will—absent a major budgetary crisis—continue to back Plan Colombia, the White House is also largely subservient to domestic influences, particularly from organized labor and entrenched Democrats in Congress who continue to block ratification of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

The Obama Administration, moreover, lacks any appreciable strategy for applying pressure on Chávez to cease support for terrorism. It demonstrates no consistent public diplomacy strategy and largely minimizes the threat posed by Chávez's backing for terrorist groups.

The Obama Administration needs a proactive stance to back Santos's bold leap. It should:

- Act to win early ratification of the free trade agreement to back Santos's plan for “democratic prosperity”;
- Continue vigorous support for Plan Colombia;
- Redouble diplomatic efforts to isolate FARC and end Colombian insurgency/narco-terrorism in the near term; and
- Send a clear signal to Chavez that failure to strengthen joint border security and remove FARC and terror groups from Venezuelan soil will result in Venezuela's placement on the state sponsors of terrorism list.

Santos Deserves U.S. Support. Colombia's new President Santos has made a bold although not risk-free effort to tackle the most pressing challenge to peace and security in South America. His effort merits U.S. and international support. It cannot be allowed to degenerate into yet another Chavista ruse.

—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.