

Ideas That Shape (ITS)

FARC and UNASUR

Internal security threats endangering South American prosperity

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Editor's Note: please be advised that the sources used in this research paper are OSINT. Ideas That Shape (ITS) hopes that this research paper would encourage further constructive academic and expert studies, discussions and debates on the subject

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FARC and UNASUR

Internal security threats endangering South American prosperity

Latin American security in the 20th century has been much less characterized by interstate conflict and international threats, and in turn has experienced a significant spike in domestic threats to the central government due to the activity of rebel militant groups. This tendency has been analyzed by Salehyan (Salehyan, 2010) who argues that global security trends have shied away from direct interstate conflict and allowed for internal civil violence to compose the majority of international conflict. In the past century we have seen successful military revolutions led against the central governments in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Peru, and Uruguay.

The keen observer will notice that two of these countries are major political and economic drivers of the nascent South American socio-political economic trading bloc, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Created by unifying two South American regional trade blocs in 2008 – the Andean Community of Nations (CAN) and the Mercado del Sur (MERCOSUR) – UNASUR was created to unify the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of South American countries into a single identity akin to that of the European Union (EU).

Unfortunately, unlike the member states of the EU, South American nations are still rife with struggling economic structures, political instability, rampant underdevelopment, and most importantly, heavily-active, internal revolutionary militants. The presence of these military groups coupled with the history of successful political revolution creates a completely distinct area of concern with respect to intrastate security and the stability of the heads of state composing UNASUR that distinguish it from the EU.

This creates a gaping hole in the possibility for successful interstate relations. Without consistent leaders or a stable political system, a country cannot ascribe to economic interdependence or take advantage of the merits of free trade within a regional trade bloc. This raises the question as to whether or not UNASUR should involve itself in the internal security threats of its member states or leave these issues for the members to resolve themselves.

This paper presents evidence indicating that regional economic blocs such as UNASUR should

be directly involved in the resolution of internal conflicts within its member states. The paper analyzes the actions of a Colombian rebel group, the Revolutionary Forces of Columbia (FARC), and the impact that its continued hostility towards the central Colombian government has had on political solidarity within the nation, as well as the threat that a lack of stability poses to regional political unification.

Furthermore, this analysis is extrapolated to UNASUR to show how it can achieve its aforementioned goals as a regional organization. The goals of economic and political stability within the region clearly show that UNASUR should be exceedingly apprehensive of the activity of rebel militants within the borders of its member states.

FARC was established in 1964, and is the foremost rebel military group in Colombia. Its goals against the Colombian state, which were initially Marxist ideals, have shifted towards the elimination of American presence within the Colombian state (BBC, Profiles: Colombia's armed groups, 2013). FARC had formally requested that UNASUR intervene in the conflict regarding the revolutionary group and the Colombian government after almost five decades of guerrilla tactics against the state.

This came at the behest of FARC leadership, who seemed interested in ending the conflict and possibly legitimizing their cause via legal political processes as opposed to military action (Al Sema, 2010). The Colombian government rejected the FARC's plea for UNASUR assistance and demanded that they lay down their arms before peace talks could ensue (Begg, 2010). Ultimately the Colombian government maintained that this was a Colombian issue and that it need not involve the authority of a nascent supranational organization. UNASUR agreed with the position of the Colombian state and deemed the affair to be a matter of domestic concern (Begg, 2010).

Despite Colombia's reluctance to involve UNASUR in the resolution of the FARC's grievances, the conflict in Colombia spilled over other borders and included several international actors without their volition. Since former Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's aggressive tactics towards the FARC pushed their military forces to the periphery of the country, this became an issue for its neighbours, Ecuador and Venezuela.

Most notably, in 2008 this conflict immediately spread into Ecuador where a Colombian

taskforce illegally penetrated Ecuadorian territory to pursue FARC forces. This resulted in the death of a major FARC official, Raul Reyes, whose personal computer provided evidence implicating Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan government for their direct financial and military support of the FARC (The Economist, 2008).

When this information was revealed the Colombian government publicly proclaimed Hugo Chavez' involvement with the FARC and demanded that he assist them in capturing and detaining the rebel camps that were reported to be stationed in Venezuela along the Colombian border (Palmer, 2010).

The Venezuelan government vehemently denied any existence of a relationship between themselves and the FARC, refused to cooperate with Colombian requests to attack or pursue FARC bases on their border with Columbia (Palmer, 2010), and ultimately broke all ties with Colombia while threatening military retaliation if their sovereignty was breached (Begg, 2010).

The Colombian government consequently responded by appealing to the Organization of American States (OAS), an organization based in Washington, D.C. whose prime directive is maintaining peace and suppressing security threats throughout the American continents (BBC, 2010). The OAS proceeded to corroborate the information presented by Colombian officials, who had made several requests to the Venezuelan government to cooperate with the efforts to locate and neutralize FARC forces within Venezuelan territory (Palmer, 2010).

The Venezuelan government refused to follow the orders of the OAS, dismissing them as American efforts to further extend their influence in South America (The Economist, 2008). Evidently, the "Colombian issue" has gone far beyond the borders of Colombia to include, not just other states such as Ecuador and Venezuela, but also other international organizations in the form of the OAS. UNASUR clearly made it their mandate to become the regional authority within almost every aspect of South American international relations.

It stands to reason that the inclusion of UNASUR in the matter would prevail over another American organization, which one could construe as a further attempt to solidify its influence in the

region. The fact that the FARC would approach UNASUR to help in the process of brokering a peace treaty signifies that this organization is appealing to leftist groups who view it as a Bolivarian coalition of nations attempting to unify the peoples of South America.

In 2012 the FARC and the Colombian government were successful in brokering an agreement to engage in peace talks as well as a loosely-maintained ceasefire assisted by Cuban, Norwegian, and Venezuelan authorities (Franks, 2013). The peace talks, which initially began in Norway, were aided by Venezuelan officials who have now mended relations with the Colombian state and wish to see peace achieved throughout the neighbouring country (Forero, 2012).

The peace talks have now been moved to Cuba where the Cuban officials have taken the responsibility of officiating between the FARC and the Colombian government. These peace talks have been effective but increasingly more stagnant as the topic of land reform has irritated both parties and culminated in the end of their ceasefire (Hansen-Bundy, 2013).

Whether the Colombian government is willing to accept UNASUR's input during these peace talks or not, UNASUR must maintain exceptionally close attention to the results of the peace talks currently proceeding in Cuba and maintain a strong presence throughout the situation. UNASUR's structure constitutes that of a supranational organization much like the EU.

For a supranational organization to function in a format necessary to realize its goals of fomenting regional economic prosperity, it must promote the notion that member states forego some levels of sovereignty and political autonomy through the cooperation of multiple heads of state. This may lead to the creation of a militarized arm of UNASUR to maintain the security of the region for its member states and for its citizenry.

The inclusion of a regional Latin American security force provides a more tactically effective body that is more cognizant of the region and its environment than other international peacekeeping forces such as the UN. This could truly avoid the complications and consequences of an international intervention, such as the Somali UNOSOM missions of the 1990s outlined by University of Toronto Professor Aisha Ahmad (Ahmad, 2012).

This shift in the balance of power is only effective when the member states have sufficient levels of political security and effective bureaucratic channels to ensure the legitimacy and stability of their democratically elected governments. None of these conditions can be attained if internal state security threats jeopardize the legitimacy of their representative leaders or their governments. Nor can these goals be achieved if tensions between its member states reach the same level of volatility as Colombia and Venezuela have in recent years (Begg, 2010).

The situation with the FARC has threatened the stability of the Colombian government for almost five decades, and on more than one occasion has come close to succeeding in the assassination of the sitting president. Were the FARC to achieve a successful revolution, any and all delegates and representatives of the Colombian government would no longer be legitimate representatives of the state and would effectively exclude Colombia from UNASUR until all member countries ratified a decision to include the new government. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a successful revolutionary militant group would be willing to cooperate with UNASUR and ascribe to the ideals of the organization.

The FARC is an extreme-left, Marxist organization that may not perceive the capitalist agenda of Brazil and Argentina as a reflection of their own political beliefs or the will of the people. This is a particular threat to the union as Colombia and Venezuela agreed to alternate the position of UNASUR Secretary General between their representatives in the years following UNASUR Secretary General Nestor Kirchner's death in 2010 (UTC, 2011).

South American history with respect to revolutionary groups, as well as the current levels of rebel military activity, maintains that UNASUR's priorities must keep internal state security relatively high on its list if they are to bring about the prosperity they strive to achieve. The argument boils down to whether South Americans will stand firm in their general desire to unite with one another and become a single force on the world stage, or give a higher priority to sovereign political autonomy and allow their particular interests to stifle the goals they have so steadily sought.

This decision ultimately lies on the shoulders of the South American heads of state and their successors. The untimely death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (Sanchez, 2013) leaves an

enormous question mark over the possibility of legitimate South American socio-political unification. With Chavez no longer in power multiple political relationships may be lost in the fray of a regime change.

The presence of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at President Chavez' funeral, coupled with the affection that he displayed towards the deceased president and his family, bring to light how closely the two political figures were connected (Taheri, 2013). Chavez was directly linked to Iranian-backed rebel group Hezbollah and provided "bases of training and communication in Venezuela" (BBC, 2013).

The ongoing relationship between President Ahmadinejad and Chavez' replacement and devout Chavez subordinate, (Neuman, 2013) President Nicolas Maduro may cause a definitive change within the relationship between Iran, Venezuela, and Hezbollah. Maduro was personally selected by Chavez (Foster, 2013) which demonstrates the confidence Chavez had that he will continue his leadership and the direction of his regime.

President Maduro appears to be expressing nothing to the contrary (Neuman, 2013). The concern now is what the two friendly OPEC members, Ahmadinejad and Maduro, may engage in while the seats shuffle in Caracas. Will they increase the funding to their proxy rebels? Will they place a chokehold on international oil and cause another oil crisis to unbalance the global economy?

The connection between the Venezuelan and Iranian governments with the two rebel militant groups, FARC and Hezbollah, prove that Salehyan's analysis of delegated violence is very present with respect to these two nations (Salehyan, 2010). The transition to a new regime poses serious implications for Venezuela, both domestically and internationally, and has the possibility of genuinely affecting the course of global politics.

With the passing of President Hugo Chavez, one of Latin America's most vocal and charismatic figures has passed away. Now the world must hold its breath while we wait to see if President Maduro will fill his Bolivarian shoes or stray from the path carved out by his predecessor.

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