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FEATURED Q&A

Would Colombia-Venezuela Military Ties Boost Security?



Just days after Gustavo Petro was sworn in as Colombia's president, Venezuela said it is seeking closer military ties with the neighboring country. // File Photo: Facebook Page of Gustavo Petro.

Q Venezuela will seek to re-establish military ties with Colombia, the Venezuelan defense ministry said Aug. 9 in a tweet. The announcement came just two days after the inauguration of Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who is seeking to thaw relations between Colombia and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's government. What would closer military ties between Venezuela and Colombia mean in practice? What effect would closer cooperation on military matters mean for drug trafficking and for dissident rebels operating in the area? What do the Colombian and Venezuelan governments have to gain from closer military ties?

A Stephen Johnson, former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for Western Hemisphere affairs (2007-2009): "Venezuelan and Colombian militaries are two very different institutions. The Venezuelan armed forces answer to a corrupt, repressive dictatorship. Their mission is to keep the country's near destitute population under control and make money for the regime by facilitating narcotics and natural resource trafficking. Poorly trained in military missions, they are nonetheless well schooled in terrorizing regime opponents and ordinary citizens. Despite being unconventional, they represent one of Latin America's largest armed forces with some 1.6 million active duty, reserve and regime-backed militia members under arms by some accounts. In contrast, the Colombian military is a conventional defense force: highly professional, largely dedicated to public service and much smaller in number. Lest we forget, Colombian soldiers and police proved their mettle against guerrilla armies and criminal bands

Continued on page 3

TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Brazil's Election Campaigns for Presidential Race Officially Begin

Brazil's presidential election campaigns officially began on Tuesday with incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro and his rival, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, both rallying supporters.

Page 2

BUSINESS

Costa Rican President Seeking to Sell State Banks

Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves said Tuesday that he is seeking to sell two state-owned banks to reduce public debt.

Page 3

ECONOMIC

Cuba to Allow Foreign Stakes in Wholesale, Retail Sectors

Cuba's deputy trade minister, Ana Teresita González, announced Tuesday that the government will allow foreign investment in the country's state-run wholesale and retail sectors.

Page 2



González // File Photo: Cuban Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Brazil's Presidential Election Campaigns Officially Begin

Brazil's presidential election campaigns officially began on Tuesday, with incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro rallying supporters in the city of Juiz de Fora, where in 2018 a mentally ill man stabbed him while he was campaigning, and his rival, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, visiting a Volkswagen plant in the city of São Bernardo do Campo, a manufacturing city near São Paulo where he became a prominent union leader in the 1970s, the Associated Press reported. Both men have increased security precautions, including by wearing bulletproof vests on the campaign trail, the AP reported. Lula, who has a double-digit lead ahead of Bolsonaro in polls, had been scheduled to speak Tuesday at an engine factory, but federal police urged him to skip the event because of concerns over security. In Juiz de Fora, Bolsonaro arrived on a motorcycle and was surrounded by security guards, unlike his appearance there in 2018 when he was attacked after plunging himself into the crowd, the wire service reported. "It's impossible not to be moved, returning to this city," Bolsonaro told supporters on Tuesday. "The memory that I carry with me is of a rebirth. My life was spared by our creator," he added. Bolsonaro has characterized the race as one between good and evil, claiming that Lula is "possessed by the devil," The Guardian reported. In his speech to supporters on Tuesday, Lula rebuked his rival. "If there's anyone who is possessed by the devil, it's this Bolsonaro," said Lula, who was Brazil's president from 2003 to 2010, The Guardian reported. In a survey released Monday by pollster IPEC, formerly known as IBOPE, Lula had 44 percent support, leading Bolsonaro who had 32 percent, Reuters reported. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the valid votes in the first round on Oct. 2, Lula would win with 51 percent of the vote, ahead of Bolsonaro's 35 percent, in the Oct. 30 runoff, the poll showed.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Cuba to Allow Foreign Investment in Wholesaling, Retail

The Cuban government said late on Monday that it will open its state-run wholesale and retail sector to some foreign investment, marking a major shift in a policy that had been in place since Fidel Castro took power in 1959, Reuters reported. The opening comes as Cuba faces a severe economic crisis, shortages of basic goods and electricity blackouts exacerbated in recent years by the Covid-19 pandemic and U.S. sanctions. Cuba's deputy trade minister, Ana Teresita González, said foreign investors will be allowed to fully own local wholesalers or participate in joint ventures. Foreign investment in the retail sector would be more restricted, she added. González said the government will "selectively" allow investors into the sector through joint ventures, though the state will remain the dominant actor in the retail sector. The government said it will prioritize businesses that have been based in Cuba for several years or that sell green energy technologies, adding that there will not initially be any market competition, BBC News reported. According to government officials, the measures aim to ensure that local producers and consumers have access to raw materials and goods. Economy Minister Alejandro Gil claimed that the change will allow the "expansion and diversification of supply to the population and contribute to the recovery of domestic industry", BBC News reported.

Groups Sue U.S. Gov't Over Puerto Rico Dredging Project

The Center for Biological Diversity, along with environmental groups El Puente and CORALations, filed a lawsuit against the U.S. government on Tuesday that challenges a project to dredge Puerto Rico's San Juan

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexico Seeks Help From U.S., German Companies in Effort to Rescue Miners

Mexico will seek support from both a U.S. and German company to undertake the rescue of 10 miners who have been trapped in a flooded coal mine in Coahuila state since Aug. 3, Reuters reported Tuesday. Mexican officials did not name the companies but said they would get the companies' advice in order to adjust their rescue actions. Relatives of the trapped miners have expressed frustration with the slow pace of the rescue effort and have been pushing the government to move more swiftly.

Venezuela to Help Cuba Rebuild Oil Terminal Partially Destroyed by Fire

Venezuela will assist Cuba in rebuilding the Matanzas terminal, the country's largest oil terminal, which was partially destroyed by a fire earlier this month, Reuters reported. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro made the announcement on Tuesday and directed the head of state-run oil company PDVSA to coordinate with Cuban officials. The Matanzas terminal is Cuba's only supertanker port and handles most of the country's fuel oil imports, the majority of which come from Venezuela.

S&P to Lower Ratings Starting Point for Mexican Nonbank Financial Firms

S&P Global Ratings announced Tuesday that it would lower its starting point for ratings on Mexican nonbank financial institutions, Reuters reported. The ratings agency said it would change its starting point for the institutions to BB-minus from BB due to financing risks in the sector, the wire service reported. Nonbank financial institutions in Mexico face large debt burdens in coming years, and investors' confidence in the sector is slipping, the ratings agency said.

Bay to facilitate larger tankers' access to a new terminal for liquified natural gas (LNG), the Associated Press reported. The lawsuit alleges that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers fast-tracked an environmental assessment for the project and failed to fully consider the project's effects on local communities, flora and fauna—including several threatened and endangered species—and environmental justice, according to a statement from the Center for Biological Diversity. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and other defendants have 60 days to respond to the lawsuit, according to the AP. Then, both sides can present arguments to a judge, who will make a decision that is appealable. The \$60 million project was expected to begin this fall, according to Dredging Today. In February, Puerto Rico Ports Authority Executive Director Joel Pizá said the project would allow ships to "transport 34.3 million gallons of LNG in San Juan Bay and not 5.2 million of gallons as it is now." The construction of a new LNG terminal has faced several challenges, especially opposition from environmental groups that are pushing Puerto Rico to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels.

BUSINESS NEWS

Costa Rica's Chaves Seeking to Sell State-Owned Banks

Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves announced on Tuesday that he will present a bill to sell two state-owned banks and is also planning to sell a stake in the national insurance company, Reuters reported. The measure would include the sale of state-owned banks Banco de Costa Rica and Banco Internacional de Costa Rica. Chaves said the government is also planning to sell a 49 percent stake in insurer Instituto Nacional de Seguros (INS). The sales aim to raise money to close the country's fiscal gap. Chaves estimated the sale of the banks could raise \$1.8 billion, with the sale of the stake in INS raising another \$890 million.

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

in reducing a decades-long civil war to a manageable peace process. For Colombia's part, any cooperation with Venezuela may well be cautious and superficial—likely serving as eyewash for Petro's supporters on the left and treated with a great deal of suspicion by the country's security services that remember Venezuela's history of supporting Colombian guerrillas. For Venezuela's Maduro, it could provide a propaganda coup and a fresh opportunity to spy on and lay traps to compromise Colombian soldiers. Compare the two defense ministers: Colombia's Iván Velásquez is former prosecutor and a principled corruption fighter; Venezuela's Vladimir Padrino López is military apparatchik who's reportedly had his fingers in port operations, mining and money laundering, suspicious food distribution schemes and drug smuggling. Colombia's military has the most to lose."

A Julia Buxton, British Academy Global Professor at the University of Manchester: "Improved military relations are integral to development and security in both Venezuela and Colombia. Criminal entrepreneurs, armed groups and corrupt military and civilian officials in both countries have benefited from poor cross-border military and intelligence cooperation. An environment of impunity and insecurity has been exacerbated by mutually exclusive military doctrines and foreign military relations. Since the 1990s, Colombia has received more than \$10 billion in U.S. counternarcotics assistance. This has not led to any advance in illegal drug market containment—coca cultivation and cocaine production reached historic highs during the Duque presidency. It also failed to staunch paramilitary and insurgent violence. As Colombian military doctrine has hewed to the United States, Venezuela has conversely veered to asymmetric warfare and division of the country into a complex of integral defense zones. Since 2006, U.S. and European (2017) arms

export controls steered Venezuela to supply agreements with Russia, and the country has looked to Cuba for instruction on 'anti-imperialist defense.' In both Colombia and Venezuela, military officials have profited from pork opportunities in defense supply and protection of criminal interests—at an egregious cost to human rights, democracy and national security. Closer cooperation will require intensive confidence building, as well as mutual reorientation to shared security interests with benefits for institutional professionalism and transparency on both sides of the border. Venezuela is a critical partner in Petro's plans for disarmament of rebel groups and reduction of drug trafficking. (The UNODC reported Venezuela's seizure of 51 tons of Colombian cocaine in 2021.) It is a prospect that powerful vested interests will resist."

A Diego Arria, member of the Advisor board, director of the Columbus Group in New York and former permanent representative of Venezuela to the United Nations: "It is not surprising that Maduro would try to erase overnight the sordid actions that he for years has instigated against the Colombian people, harboring narco guerrilla terrorists. The statement by his defense minister, General Padrino, that he was instructed to contact his Colombian counterpart to re-establish military cooperation was immediately and sharply rejected by President Petro, who unequivocally declared: 'before military relations comes institutional and economic issues, as well as social, cultural and even family ones.' He was obviously reminding Maduro that Colombia is ruled by democratic institutions, not by the military, and that a decision to re-establish military relations is not a priority nor a unilateral decision by Maduro. Petro knows well the level of cooperation that the Venezuelan regime since Chávez has provided to narco guerrillas as well as the dominant role it plays in drug trafficking. Traditional military cooperation

Continued on page 4

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 3

between the two nations was ended by Hugo Chávez who openly helped the guerrillas and their drug trafficking. The Colombian army is the best in the region, and I am sure it would be extremely careful about participating in any arrangement with the infamous Maduro-Padrino forces that are today in charge of torturing and persecuting dissidents, accused before the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, and leading the pillage of Venezuelan treasure and natural resources. Maduro mistakenly believes that a former guerrilla leader is at the helm of Colombia, not a constitutional and democratic president."

A **R. Evan Ellis, Latin America research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute:** "Re-establishing military ties, following the exchange of ambassadors, benefits the Maduro regime by decreasing its isolation in security, as well as in political terms. Colombian Defense Minister Iván Velásquez will likely proceed with caution, reflecting his newness, plus profound concerns within Colombia regarding the direction that Gustavo Petro

intends to take the nation. Ties are likely to begin with high-level talks establishing the scope agreement, likely including border coordination as well as possibly exchanging liaison officers, students between each other's professional military education and

“ Colombian Defense Minister Iván Velásquez will likely proceed with caution.”

— R. Evan Ellis

training institutions. For Colombia, intelligence, counterterrorism and counterdrug cooperation will be more delicate, given the penetration of the Venezuelan armed forces by Cuban intelligence and Venezuelan armed forces' collaboration with narco-traffickers, FARC dissidents, the ELN and other entities engaged in criminal activities against the Colombian state."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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