

Feb 23 2010

The poisoned bases. Reflections on the new US-Colombian military agreements.

LSE Ideas

By Vanni Pettinà

Madrid is not the Paris of the late 1970's, the city where the Argentinean Julio Cortazar, along with a copious group of Latin American intellectuals, took shelter from the shocking bloodshed rocketing the Southern Cone in those dark years. Still, the Spanish capital city is a place where you can have interesting encounters. It was in Madrid, a few years ago, where a friend of mine, a professor at Bogotá University who fled due to the threats she has received from paramilitary groups in her country, introduced me to Roland, the front man of a Colombian music band called the *Pasajeros*. Roland, a skinny guy with long hair and lively eyes, had just landed in Spain as a political refugee. In July 2004, after an exhibition, the Colombian police had arrested him and the other members of the band on charges of rebellion and support for terrorism. Eventually, after this, the Pasajeros had managed to exile themselves to Spain, where they now live under the status of political refugees. Pasajeros's music style, *La Canción Propuesta*, is a successful mix between the sounds of Cuban singer and songwriter Silvio Rodriguez and the Chilean folksinger Victor Jara. Their songs, whilst particularly poetic, are heavily charged with social content and, above all, are extremely critical of the Uribe government. Not surprisingly, the text of one of their song, *Seguridad Democrática* (Democratic Security), which is also the name adopted by the Colombian government to indicate its policies of contention of political violence in the country, was used as evidence against them. The lyrics of the song explicitly criticize the costs bared by the Colombian society in term of the reductions of freedoms and civil rights as a consequence of Álvaro Uribe's internal counterterrorist policies.

The story of Roland and the Pasajeros popped up in my mind a few weeks ago while listening to Mauricio Rodríguez Múnera, the Colombian ambassador in London, giving a talk in a roundtable at LSE-IDEAS. The event, organized by the IDEAS [Latin America International Affairs Program](#), focused on the issue of the new military agreements between Bogotá and Washington, which give US troops broader access to Colombian military facilities placed in several distinct parts of the country. The other guests of the gathering, the journalist Grace Livingstone, Liam Craig-Best, Director of the NGO Justice For Colombia and Spencer Wood, Partner at O.H. Parsons, Trade Union solicitors, bitterly criticized the agreement, arguing that it will bring more repression within Colombia and negatively affect the already problematic human rights conditions in the country. By contrast, the skilled Colombian diplomat defended the record of the Uribe government in reducing violence and in rolling back the main guerrilla force still active in the country – the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC) – which only a few years ago controlled a considerable part of Colombian territory. The new military agreements, the ambassador pointed out, will help to strengthen the Colombian government's capacity to check the guerrillas and to fight against their lucrative business: narco-trafficking. The diplomat then concluded that the result, would be a clear improvement in the stability of the country and its democracy.

It is true that Uribe's Democratic Security strategy may have brought some results when it comes to reducing insecurity. In addition, it has probably weakened the FARC, whose control over Colombian territory is now less effective and extended. Indeed, during the last decade, positive electoral results have repeatedly shown a good amount of popularity for Uribe and his party. Nonetheless, the costs in terms of human rights and political repression are, as underlined by the case of the Pasajeros and by many NGO reports, severe. A look through web pages of [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) clearly highlights that, in spite of what the Ambassador argued, the problems Colombia has faced in the last forty years are all still there. The drug trade, the resurgence of paramilitary groups and their penetration of local authorities, state violence and repression, huge population displacements and a guerrilla movement, weakened but not defeated at all, are nightmares still shadowing Colombians. The Andean country is not a failed state but its chances of becoming one are still very high.

This being said, what is the connection between the human rights context in Colombia and the new military agreement between Washington and Bogotá? To put it in other words, could the American redeployment in Colombia truly have an effect on the human rights problem in the Andean country as suggested, for example, by all but one of the speakers at the IDEAS roundtable? I would say that there is a clear problem of political opportunity, which should and could dissuade Washington to pursue the bases agreement. In fact, military collaboration with a government constantly criticized for its disregard for civil and human rights is not exactly what one would expect from the new Barack Obama administration. It is unlikely that US troops deployed in the Colombian army bases will increase or decrease the number of crimes against Colombian population or civil rights violation against Trade Unions, NGOs, intellectuals or singers. Nonetheless, the agreement legitimizes a government that should be challenged and forced to improve its policies in the human rights field. In this sense, criticism against the agreement by the speakers who antagonized the Colombian ambassador during the IDEAS-LAIAP roundtable is more than justified and should be supported.

During the Cold War, Washington faced a Cuban-Soviet threat in the region in different ways. Support for democracy and development alternated with sustaining assistance for dictatorships and antisocial, ultraliberal economic policies. Some of these may have proven successful, but the consequences of the pro-dictatorship cycles in the region have been appalling. The 1970's, with 30,000 victims of repression only in Argentina and in such a relatively short time (1976-1983), are still a monument of mourning in what was a period of Henry Kissinger's policies of pragmatism and appeasement toward the dictatorships of Jorge Videla, Augusto Pinochet and co. Thankfully, the end of the Cold War then gave the impression of bringing to an end the schizophrenia that had marked US foreign policy in the region. However, the recent US-Colombian military agreement seems to hark back to the bad old days. The Uribe government should not be considered a dictatorship at all. To the contrary, he has been democratically elected twice even if the contents of his internal security policies resemble Carl Schmitt's notorious transition from liberal democracy to democratic dictatorship. In this sense, supporting governments not able to protect and guarantee the welfare of their own citizens is a shortcut Washington should not follow again. Barack Obama still has enough credibility and political capital to pursue other paths.

The issue of human rights is crucial but not the only one that should be taken into account in approaching the Colombian quagmire and the problem of the new military agreement. In fact, the evident limitation of a criticism focused exclusively on human rights overshadows the international dimensions of the problem. I suspect that the lack of interest in the international aspects of the issue is only partially a coincidence. In fact, understanding the international setting in which the agreement is taking place, means also analysing the strategies Colombia's neighbours have carried on during recent years. In particular, I would argue, there is a clear link between the new military agreement between Colombia and Washington and the international strategies countries like Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia have developed recently. Some commentators seem to ill at ease to criticize decisions and strategies undertaken by La Paz, Quito and Caracas. Nonetheless, the sometimes ill-conceived strategies of Evo Morales, Rafael Correa and Hugo Chavez have also contributed to escalate the tension in the region, creating the climate for the deployment of US troops in Colombia.

What is certain is that in the Andean region a new Cold War atmosphere is silently mounting and its deactivation relies on a prompt identification of its causes. Both the Uribe and the Obama administrations have gone on record as saying that the military redeployment is an answer to the narco-trafficking issue. I believe this is only a small part of the problem. In fact, the military agreement with Colombia comes on the heels of the decision to redeploy the US fourth fleet to protect American interests in the Caribbean and South America. The new US military presence in South America and the Caribbean seems to come as a consequence of the web of international alliances Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have weaved during the last years. In particular, it comes as a reaction to a quick strengthening of the relations with Russia, China and Iran. What is going on in the Andean region is therefore not merely a case of "businesses as usual." Rather, there is a geopolitical logic behind this strategy of alliances, which is epitomized by the selection of partners. In fact, for Washington, Russia, China and Iran are, to different extents, challenging powers in the new multi-polar international environment that is slowly taking shape from the ashes of the Cold War. While Ecuador and Bolivia have mainly increased the volume of economic cooperation and trade agreements, including arm transfer, with China, Russia and Iran, Venezuela has gone a step forward. In April 2008, Caracas and Teheran signed a Memorandum of Understanding assuring each other full military support and cooperation. Furthermore, as reported by [Fernando Llanos](#) in one of his LAIAP News Analyses, Chavez has visited Russia four times in the last few years and has committed to buying Russian high tech weapons for a value of two billion dollars. Even more important, in November 2008, Venezuelan fleet participated in a joint naval exercise in the Caribbean with a Russian task group belonging to the Northern Fleet. I am not sure the Bolivarian twenty-first century socialism project, whose aims of social reform are absolutely legitimate, should be compatible with an alliance with autocratic Putin-Medvedev's Russia or the even more gloomy and repressive

Iranian regime. Since these new alliances are far from being crucial for solving Bolivian or Venezuelan social problems, this strategy looks like an ill-conceived policy if not a straightforward provocation.

The lack of an ideological alternative to US hegemony in the current international environment, which is nonetheless marked by mounting rivalry, prevents history from happening again. Moreover, neither Russia nor Iran or China have the capacity and the will, which the Soviet Union possessed during the Cold War, to project their influence in the Western Hemisphere. But history repeats itself, first occurring as a tragedy, second as a farce. The Cold War is not coming again, but the mounting tensions are once again unnecessarily distracting economic and political resources from urgent social problems in the region. And, still more important, the new conflictive context is not helping to address the imperative human rights issue in Colombia. On the contrary, it is allowing the Uribe government to eschew the problem and to improve its legitimacy.

Madrid will probably hold on to its Parisian atmosphere for some time, but, sadly for Roland and the *Pasajeros*, their return tickets to Colombia will have to wait.

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