

The Venezuelan crisis, regional dynamics and the Colombian peace process

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■ Executive summary

Venezuela has entered a crisis of governance that will last for at least another two years. An unsustainable economic model has caused triple-digit inflation, economic contraction, and widespread scarcities of food and medicines. An unpopular government is trying to keep power through increasingly authoritarian measures: restricting the powers of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, avoiding a recall referendum, and restricting civil and political rights. Venezuela's prestige and influence in the region have clearly suffered. Nevertheless, the general contours of the region's emphasis on regional autonomy and state sovereignty are intact and suggestions that Venezuela is isolated are premature. Venezuela's participation in the Colombian peace process since 2012 has allowed it to project an image of a responsible member of the international community and thereby counteract perceptions of it as a "rogue state". Its growing democratic deficits make this projected image all the more valuable and Venezuela will likely continue with a constructive role both in consolidating peace with the FARC-EP and facilitating negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN. However, a political breakdown or humanitarian crisis could alter relations with Colombia and change Venezuela's role in a number of ways.

Introduction

During his 14 years in office Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez Frias sought to turn his country into a leading promotor of the integration of Latin American states and regional autonomy from U.S. influence. Among Chávez's lasting contributions were his support for the creation of the Union of Southern Nations (UNASUR) and the Council of Latin American and Caribbean Heads of State (CELAC). Chávez also played a key role in bringing the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) to the negotiating table for peace talks with the government of President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia.

In this report we will look at Venezuela's regional role and key bilateral relations, and how its participation in the Colombian peace process fits with its goals. We will then examine the economic and political dimensions of its current crisis and how this might effect its regional role and participation in the peace process.

Venezuela's regional role

Since 1998 four principles have governed Venezuelan foreign policy. Firstly, the Venezuelan government has

aimed to maximise profits from the country's oil production. Together with Iran and Russia, the Venezuelan government has sought to accomplish this through restricting production and thus maintaining prices. However, these objectives have clashed with those of other OPEC countries, including Saudi Arabia, which has sought the maximisation of profit through the maximisation of output.

Secondly, the Venezuelan government has tried to diversify its trade partners and reduce its dependence on the U.S. In doing so it has turned largely toward China, which represents a significant market and has the resources to build refineries that can process Venezuela's heavy grade of crude oil. Venezuela has also sought bilateral trade agreements and cooperation with both regional allies and authoritarian governments that support an "anti-imperial" axis.

Thirdly, the Venezuelan government has sought to "soft balance" U.S. influence in the region (Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2011). This has involved, for example, the pursuit of diplomatic engagements, the creation of alternative regional organisations that do not include the U.S., and routinely accusing the U.S. of intervention and meddling.

The Venezuelan government has also utilised foreign aid and subsidised oil to assist regional allies with development projects and, according to some critics, to finance political campaigns (COHA, 2010).

Finally, the Venezuelan government has attempted to construct a new multilateralism. It founded the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas and strongly promoted regional bodies that exclude the U.S. and Canada, such as UNASUR and CELAC. Each of these organisations has promoted regional integration and competed with the inter-American human rights system, which includes the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Gill, 2013).

Key Venezuelan bilateral relations

The U.S.

While Venezuela historically had strong foreign relations with the U.S., these relations deteriorated rapidly after the 1998 election of Chávez, but especially after the 2002 coup against him. Venezuela still maintains that the U.S. was an organising force behind the coup – a charge that the U.S. denies (Corrales & Romero, 2012). Observers have argued that the U.S.'s clumsy management of its relations with Venezuela fueled Chávez's neo-nationalism (McCoy, 2009).

However, despite poor diplomatic relations and heated rhetoric from both Chávez and various parts of the U.S. government, the U.S. remains one of Venezuela's largest trading partners, with trade between the two countries amounting to \$23.9 billion in 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). And although the Venezuelan government has sought to diversify its oil trading partners, the U.S. still consumes upward of 30% of all Venezuelan oil exports (but with a negative trend over recent years) (EIA, 2016).

Nevertheless, some have characterised the two countries as mutual "mid-level security threats" (Corrales & Romero, 2012). Chávez routinely accused the U.S. government of aiming to undermine the Bolivarian Revolution by supporting and funding opposition groups, as well as multiple plots to assassinate him – accusations that have continued under Chávez's successor, President Nicolás Maduro. For its part, the U.S. government has sanctioned the Venezuelan government for allegedly harbouring and supporting members of the FARC-EP and repressing domestic civil society organisations (*El Universal*, 2012).

Government repression of the 2014 anti-government protests led to a push by anti-Castro Republican senators and representatives in the U.S. Congress to pass legislation that imposed targeted sanctions on Venezuelan leaders accused of human rights abuses or corruption. After fending off the legislation for months, U.S. president Barack Obama finally signed it into law on December 14th 2014, one day after announcing the normalisation of

diplomatic relations with Cuba. This allowed the Obama administration to triangulate anti-Castro legislators like Marco Rubio, Robert Menendez and Ileana Ros-Lehithen, because these sponsors of the Venezuela sanctions bill were also the most vocal critics of the U.S.'s normalising of relations with Cuba.

The implementation of these sanctions in March 2015 in an Executive Order designating Venezuela a "threat to national security" caused a regional uproar, threatening to overshadow the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement at the Summit of the Americas in April 2015. As a result, the U.S. sent Special Envoy Thomas Shannon to personally engage Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders. This policy continued throughout 2015, leading to a substantial improvement of relations (Smilde, 2015). Renewal of the sanctions bill in March led to a new round of anti-imperialist speeches and marches in Venezuela, but they did not have anywhere near the degree of salience they did one year earlier.

After a meeting between the U.S. and Venezuelan foreign ministers during the June plenary session of the OAS, the U.S. and Venezuela announced the resumption of dialogue between Shannon and Venezuelan officials. Shannon came to Venezuela shortly thereafter for a two-day visit and met with President Maduro, important opposition actors and members of civil society (Telesur, 2016b).

Cuba

Throughout Chávez's and Maduro's terms in office Cuba has remained Venezuela's strongest ally. While popular among the Venezuelan government's most radical supporters, this relationship has led to much criticism from the opposition, and polling makes clear that more than 60% of the Venezuelan public have a negative opinion of the Venezuelan government's main political and economic ally (Devlin, 2014). While in office Chávez continually cited the Cuban revolution as an inspiration, and some journalists have even speculated that the Cuban government played a prominent role in Chávez's decision to appoint Maduro as his successor.

The Venezuela-Cuba relationship has been constructed on more than ideology, however. Since the start of the Chávez government, Venezuela and Cuba have signed accords involving the transfer of 100,000 barrels of oil per day to the island in exchange for the deployment of 45,000 Cuban specialists to Venezuela (Mallett-Outtrim, 2013). Many of these specialists have served in Venezuela's medical and educational missions, but the Cuban government has also sent military and security personnel, intelligence specialists, and sports instructors to advise the Venezuelan government.

All available information suggests that the December 2014 announcement of the normalisation of ties between Cuba and the U.S. caught Venezuela by surprise. This normalisation is a reflection of Cuba's accurate perception that it cannot depend on Venezuela for its economic well-being in

the future. However, since then both Venezuela and Cuba have worked to maintain and reaffirm their relationship. When President Obama made a state visit to Cuba in March 2016, President Maduro preceded him with a three-day visit of his own, announcing that Venezuela and Cuba would strengthen their agreements in a series of economic and social projects for the period 2016-30 (Smilde, 2016a).

However, the wisdom of Cuba's strategic decision to reduce its dependency on Venezuela has recently become clear: declining Venezuelan production has meant a 40% reduction in oil shipments to Cuba in 2016 (Parraga & Ulmer, 2016).

Colombia

Venezuela and Colombia share historical ties and both consider Simon Bolivar to be their liberator. However, during the Chávez administration relations soured. Chávez accused former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe of allowing U.S. military forces to operate in Colombia and prepare for a potential invasion of Venezuela. He also accused the Colombian government of bowing to U.S. imperial interests by promoting U.S. free trade initiatives rather than regional blocs and attempting to undermine Venezuelan influence in the region.

For its part, the Colombian government accused Venezuela of attempting to destabilise it, and of providing sanctuary and financial support to the FARC-EP. After Colombian military forces raided a FARC-EP encampment across the Ecuadorian border in March 2008, killing FARC-EP leader Raul Reyes, the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian governments closed their embassies in Colombia and deployed troops along the border (Romero, 2008). Fortunately, the conflict among the three countries did not escalate further.

Nevertheless, during the raid the Colombian authorities seized Reyes' laptops, which contained significant information on the FARC-EP's operations. This information revealed that the Venezuelan government had a close, although complicated relationship with the FARC-EP, guided as much by strategic calculations as ideology (Martinez, 2011). Chávez participated in efforts at peace between the Colombian government and guerrilla groups while simultaneously supporting the latter through public advocacy or by providing clandestine financial and diplomatic support (IISS, 2011). Many in Colombia suggest that Chávez's support for the FARC-EP prevented Uribe from definitively defeating it.

Analysts have argued that the volatile relationship between Chávez and Uribe simply deepened a historical rivalry between the two nations that has traditionally been tamed by mutual economic dependence (McCoy & Diez, 2011).

Venezuela-Colombia relations did not significantly improve until the election of Juan Manuel Santos as president of Colombia in 2010. Santos openly promoted the repair of relations between the two countries, and he and Chávez

met on several occasions to discuss issues of mutual importance, including Venezuela's role in facilitating peace talks between the Colombian guerrillas and the government.

Santos, however, infuriated the Venezuelan government in May 2013 when, in the immediate aftermath of the disputed Venezuelan presidential election, he met with opposition leader Henrique Capriles Radonski, despite having recognised Maduro's electoral victory. Although the Venezuelan government temporarily withdrew from the peace talks in Cuba, Santos and Maduro met in July of that year to repair relations and move forward. Economically, Colombia has traditionally been one of Venezuela's largest trading partners, but commerce between the two countries decreased by 44% from 2014 to 2015.

In August and September 2015 the Maduro government closed several border crossings in Táchira state and deported more than a thousand Colombian citizens (Efecto Cocuyo, 2015b), while more than 15,000 Colombians left Venezuela to avoid deportation (Efecto Cocuyo, 2015a). The "infiltration of paramilitaries" into Venezuela was the main reason alleged by the Maduro government for the measures along the frontier (AVN, 2015). A more concrete reason was that the Maduro government wanted to reduce the scarcities of basic goods and it knew that many low-cost basic goods and large quantities of gasoline were making their way across the border from Venezuela to Colombia.

Some have suggested that the most important result of the border closure is that the Venezuelan military now has much firmer control of the trade in lucrative contraband items and therefore does not want the border reopened (La Patilla, 2016a). Simultaneously, the border closure has negatively affected the licit economy on both sides of the border.

In July 2016, during two consecutive weekends the border was opened, permitting tens of thousands of Venezuelans to cross over to Colombia to stock up on basic goods (Dreier, 2016). Government opponents referred to these border openings as "humanitarian corridors" and images of crowds of people queuing at the border circled the globe. After the first opening the governor of Venezuela's Táchira state said it would not happen again. Nevertheless, he relented and the next week at least 80,000 people crossed. After the second crossing the Colombian government stated that there would be no more temporary border openings and that the two countries needed to work towards a permanent reopening of the border. Talks are scheduled for early August 2016 (AFP, 2016b).

Venezuela's role in the Colombian peace talks

Negotiations with the FARC

Given its long, porous border and close relationship with Colombia, Venezuela is vital to any negotiation with irregular armed groups in Colombia. Indeed, it has participated in multiple Colombian peace efforts over the past 25 years.

President Chávez changed the course of Venezuelan diplomacy towards the Colombian conflict. From the beginning of his presidency he declared neutrality in the conflict, but in some instances his government showed passive or active support for the guerrillas' causes (Goncalves, 2014; IISS, 2011). In 2008 Chávez argued that the FARC should be recognised "as belligerent forces and not as terrorists", suggesting this would be "the first step towards peace in Colombia" (Janicke, 2008). If this were done, the guerrilla forces would be protected by the Geneva Convention, and would also have to renounce kidnapping and violence against civilians.

During the presidency of Alvaro Uribe (2002-10) Chávez mediated in a humanitarian exchange negotiation with the FARC (Cívico, 2009). The Uribe government abruptly terminated the negotiations on November 22nd 2007, accusing Chávez of not being "interested in bringing peace in Colombia but instead, of engaging in an expansionist project in the region". Nevertheless, Chávez's efforts to arrange the humanitarian exchange continued.

In the General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace signed between the parties in Havana, Cuba, on August 26th 2012, it was stated that the talks would develop with the support of "Cuba and Norway as guarantors and the governments of Venezuela and Chile as accompaniment" (ICG, 2012). Chávez was seen as an actor who could significantly influence the FARC's negotiating team (La-Tarde, 2012). Chávez's illness cut short this role, but he even had meetings with the guerrilla leadership while he was hospitalised in Venezuela and Cuba (EFE, 2015).

In the three years of his administration President Maduro has continued to support the peace negotiations, although observers suggest that this role has not been as important as Chávez's was. In January 2016 Maduro and Santos met in Quito and Maduro once again expressed his desire to contribute to the peace talks in Colombia and continue with Chávez's legacy on the issue (RT, 2016).

On June 23rd 2016 the Colombian government and the FARC-EP signed an agreement in Havana opening the door for the guerrillas' demobilisation and disarmament, which was one of the most thorny issues on the agenda. The future of the peace deal will be decided by a plebiscite later (perhaps in October 2016). Both Santos and FARC-EP

leader Rodrigo León Echeverí publicly thanked Venezuela for its role in the three-year peace process. Maduro, together with four other presidents, was in attendance for the announcement. The signing occurred on the same day that the Permanent Council of the OAS discussed OAS secretary-general Luis Almagro's report invoking the OAS Democratic Charter against Venezuela, indicating the country's complex position in hemispheric relations (Ramsey, 2016; Smilde & Pantoulas, 2016).

Negotiations with the National Liberation Army

In 2014, parallel to the peace talks with the FARC-EP in Havana, the Colombian government began private exploratory peace talks with the country's second most important guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). These pre-dialogue talks started on January 24th 2014 and lasted until March 30th 2016, when at a press conference in Caracas the two parties announced the start of formal peace talks on the basis of a six-point agenda aimed at putting an end to their armed conflict (BBC, 2016). The pre-dialogue talks took place in Ecuador, Brazil and Venezuela, with international representatives acting as facilitators.

The ELN has always expressed its gratitude to the Venezuelan government, which it considers to be an important ally of its cause. The ELN has frequently used Venezuelan territory to escape Colombia's armed forces. Insiders suggest that the Venezuelan government has had an important influence on the ELN's decision to enter dialogue.

Venezuela and the Colombian peace process in summary

What are Venezuela's interests in the Colombian peace process?

- The resolution of Colombia's civil war would significantly improve issues of governance along the border. Drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, crime and violence are all strongly related to the presence of irregular forces, and prevent social, political and economic development.
- Playing an important role in the Colombian peace negotiations confounds Venezuela's "the-enemy-of-my-friend-is-my-enemy" relations with the U.S. Because Venezuela is positively engaging Colombia in a way that the U.S. values, it reduces the latter's ability to portray Venezuela as a rogue state and international pariah.

What has Venezuela contributed to the Colombian peace process?

- Hugo Chávez played an important role in the initiation and consolidation of the peace process. He provided the FARC with political-ideological cover among its own members and supporters. As Chávez had recognised, his involvement provided leftist credentials that legitimised the fact that the FARC-EP was prepared to sit down and negotiate with the Colombian government (Martínez Meucci, 2013).

- Chávez also provided the weight of a recognised democratic state supporting the FARC.
- The Maduro government has been a complicated partner in the past three years, continuing to support the process, but also providing significant distractions:
 - Maduro responded with outrage to Henrique Capriles's meeting with Santos after the contested 2013 presidential election (see above).
 - In August 2015 the Maduro government closed the Venezuelan border with Colombia (see above).
- The importance of Venezuela's role can be seen in the way in which the country is once again providing an important reference point in the initiation of formal negotiations with the ELN (Telesur, 2016a).

Venezuela's current crisis and its regional impact

Economic crisis

Venezuela's economic difficulties have gradually intensified since Nicolás Maduro, Hugo Chávez's handpicked successor, took power in 2013. Venezuela's macroeconomic position was already deteriorating before the price of oil plummeted in the second half of 2014. Inflation in 2015 was 180% (BBC Mundo, 2016). The economy as a whole contracted by 5.7% in 2015 and by 3.9% in 2014 (BCV, 2016). The Venezuelan government has not yet published any data for 2016. The IMF estimates that the country's GDP will shrink by 8% and the inflation rate could surpass 700% – the worst in Latin America and one of the worst in the world (MercoPress, 2016).

Despite an unprecedented oil boom prior to 2014, Venezuela has limited international financial reserves and is experiencing a deficit of foreign currency. Imports have been reduced significantly, creating serious shortages of food and medicines. In the first quarter of 2016 imports were reduced by 40% from the same period in 2014, and by over 60% from 2012 levels (Sanderson & Schipani, 2016).

An overvalued currency and price controls on basic goods create massive incentives for corruption. The Maduro government carried out partial reforms of the exchange rate in 2015 and early 2016, but not enough to have a significant impact.

During 2016 the Venezuelan government and the state oil company, PDVSA, have to make almost \$10 billion in debt payments. So far PDVSA has made its payments, although around \$6 billion is due before the end of the year. The Venezuelan government has prioritised using its scarce international financial reserves (even selling gold reserves) to honour its debt commitments, which explains worsening scarcities (Moore & Schipani, 2016).

The government and PDVSA will need to renegotiate at least part of the latter's loans. Since PDVSA debt does not contain collective action clauses that could facilitate restructuring, it might only be able to renegotiate by incurring more sovereign debt through loans from international allies like China and Russia or through multiple debt swaps with private firms that operate in the country (Ellsworth et al., 2016). Because Venezuela has significant assets abroad, needs to import light crude to transport its own heavy crude, and, of course, needs to sell its oil on international markets, a default would be especially traumatic and bring the economy to a standstill.

For average Venezuelans, their country's economic meltdown is being felt through the scarcity of basic goods and the long queues outside supermarkets. Until recently, buying and reselling basic goods gave many in the popular sectors a way to get through the crisis. However, increased shortages have made even this difficult and, combined with recent price increases on some basic goods and rampant inflation in unregulated goods, mean that the situation of the poor is rapidly deteriorating.

According to a recent survey, in January 2016, 70% of Venezuelans ate three meals a day, while in June less than 40% did. In May there were 70 reported instances of looting, as compared to approximately 20 in January (Crooks, 2016). And mid-2016 has seen food protests beginning to appear across the country in places where people do not have access to price-controlled goods.

As the shortages continue to worsen, public discontent with the government rises. According to a recent poll, 71% of those asked blamed the government for the food shortages (Datanalisis, 2016), while 79% of Venezuelans have a negative opinion of Maduro's government (Datin-corp, 2016).

The government has addressed the problem of food shortages by creating local organisations of pro-government activists called Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAPs) to distribute subsidised staples door to door. According to the government, CLAPs' objective is to guarantee the poor's access to basic goods and combat the extraction and smuggling of food products (AVN, 2016). However, like many of the government's participatory initiatives, there is little supervision, and they are ripe for corruption, inefficiency and political bias. While there are reports of their distributing food, they have also generated tensions and protests (Garmendia, 2016). In any case, the CLAP initiative does not address the fundamental problem of shortages, which is not one of distribution but of supply.

Recently, the government announced the creation of a new state distribution policy for food and medicine known as the Great Sovereign and Secure Supply Mission, to be run by the armed forces under the command of the defence minister, Vladimir Padrino Lopez, who was given power over all other ministers. This has caused considerable

consternation among commentators, some of whom see it as the beginning of a “soft coup” whereby the armed forces progressively take over the executive branch of government: fully a third of government ministers are active or retired military officials. Others have said that Maduro seems to be aiming to make the armed forces a central stakeholder in Venezuela’s economic crisis.

Political crisis

The significant victory of the Venezuelan opposition in the December 6th 2015 legislative elections – winning by two million votes and 15 percentage points, and obtaining a two-thirds “super majority” (112 out of 167 seats in the legislature) – significantly altered the country’s political landscape. For Chavismo, the result was the worst in its 16 years in power. And for the first time in Venezuela’s democratic history the president has had to face a legislature controlled by a unified opposition political bloc. This electoral sea change created high expectations among the population that the country’s progressive deterioration would finally be addressed.

The Venezuelan constitution of 1999 grants many powers to the National Assembly, especially when it reaches a super majority, including the ability to curtail the executive’s powers (e.g. with vetos or motions to ministries); to appoint the heads of the other branches of government (electoral, judicial, ombudsman, etc.); and to pass significant legislation through the approval of organic laws that could change the country’s institutional framework. After the elections some analysts argued that the National Assembly would have more power than a politically wounded president – if, that is, the executive respected the results (Pantoulas, 2016).

The Maduro government accepted the results in the days after the elections, but almost immediately started to take institutional steps to neutralise the threat. Basically, the government has sought to increase its own powers while hollowing out those of the National Assembly. In the weeks after the elections, but before the members of the new National Assembly took their seats, the United Socialist Part of Venezuela (PSUV) used its control of the outgoing National Assembly to enhance its control over the country’s Supreme Court by appointing 13 new justices, all of whom were activists or former members of the PSUV (Hernández, 2015).

Supreme Court decisions have been decisive in curtailing the National Assembly’s powers and increasing executive power. Firstly, the court suspended electoral results in one of the 23 states, which pushed the opposition below a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly (even in August 2016 the assembly continues to function with 163 instead of 167 deputies) (Izaguirre, 2015). Secondly, the court reinterpreted the constitution to limit legislative oversight and control over other government branches. Thirdly, it has declared unconstitutional several laws and actions approved by the National Assembly (Amnesty Law, Central

Bank regulation, Supreme Court appointments, property rights for the Great Venezuelan Housing Mission) (Hernández, 2016). Finally, it approved in effect the executive’s ability to govern by decree, as well as a State of Exception, both of which were rejected by the National Assembly (La Patilla, 2016b).

While the opposition-controlled National Assembly has taken on a number of legislative projects, currently its main focus is on removing Maduro from the presidency. After significant disagreements among the opposition between January and March 2016 about the best way to push for Maduro’s removal, by April the opposition had focused its efforts on a recall referendum. But the National Electoral Council, dominated by the government (four of the five members are close to the Maduro government) has slowed the process through bureaucratic hurdles and delayed decisions (AFP, 2016a). If the referendum takes place after January 10th 2017 the Maduro-appointed vice president will complete the final two years of the presidential term.

Both the government and the opposition are determined not to cede ground, creating political and social tensions that have taken Venezuela to the brink. The weeks to August 2016 have made clear that international actors such as the Vatican, UNASUR and the OAS are interested in mediating the Venezuelan conflict, but such efforts are only incipient.

At this point it seems unlikely that there will be a referendum before January 10th 2017. While many members of Chavismo would like to see Maduro removed from the presidency, because they see him driving the movement off a cliff, they would prefer the opposition not to take power and so would like to see a referendum after this key date.

And support for a referendum in 2016 is not unanimous in the opposition either. The main promoter of the referendum is twice-presidential-candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski and his party, Primero Justicia. Other important opposition leaders, such as Henry Ramos Allup, publicly support a referendum, but behind closed doors suggest it would be better to let the government assume the political costs of the severe economic adjustment that is needed, and to organise the opposition for the 2016 governors’ elections and 2018 presidential election.

As a result, Allup and others in the Democratic Unity Roundtable coalition have been much more receptive of UNASUR-led efforts at dialogue than Capriles and his Primero Justicia party. It is indeed easy to doubt the sincerity of the government’s desire for such dialogue, when it has so steadfastly rejected institutional dialogue in the National Assembly or between the legislative and executive branches. Most likely it sees the push for dialogue as a way to burnish its democratic credentials at a time when it is using increasingly authoritarian measures to retain control of an ever-less-governable situation.

Impact on Venezuela's relations with the region and the Colombian peace process

Relations with the region

Venezuela's regional strength and influence are clearly waning; however, suggestions that the country is isolated are premature. The recent discussion of the state of Venezuela's democracy in the OAS are a case in point. On May 31st 2016 the OAS secretary-general, Luis Almagro, presented a 114-page report justifying the case for invoking the Democratic Charter against Venezuela. Nevertheless, three separate OAS discussions of Venezuela in June – two by the Permanent Council in Washington, DC and one plenary session in Santo Domingo – all ended by voicing support for the the UNASUR-led effort at dialogue (Smilde, 2016b; Ramsey 2016).

Analysts argued that while most countries are willing to recognise the gravity of the situation in Venezuela, the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference are still strongly defended in the region (Smilde 2016b). Furthermore, Almagro's invocation of the Democratic Charter against a democratically elected executive on behalf of another branch of government surely gives pause to other executives in the region. All governments have skeletons in the closet, especially those who have been in power for a long time, and they likely fear that such a precedent could come back to haunt them.

The Colombian peace process

The Maduro government's trajectory is clearly unsustainable and could lead to undemocratic outcomes, such as outright repression, famine or a military coup, which would alter the current status quo.

In summary, how have Venezuela's interests in the Colombian peace process changed?

- Given the nature of the current crisis, the Venezuelan government does not have the space to prioritise long-term issues of border governance.
- Nevertheless, its current vulnerability and the importance of regional perceptions and support mean that appearing to be an important peace broker is still important to it.

If some combination of factors – e.g. an escalation of tensions with Colombia and/or the U.S. – lead Venezuela to want to undermine the Colombian peace process, could it do so?

- Venezuela's participation was much more important during the early stages of the negotiations with the FARC-EP. Now that the most important agreements have been signed, Venezuela's role has mainly to do with consolidating the FARC-EP's demobilisation and incorporation into society.

- Venezuela could perhaps do the most damage through public statements:
 - It could undermine support for the peace process among the FARC rank and file by issuing statements suggesting that the Colombian government is not fulfilling its promises to the FARC-EP.
 - It could facilitate the opposition to the accords being mobilised by former president Alvaro Uribe by trumpeting the concessions the Colombian government has made to the FARC-EP.
 - It could complicate the newly initiated peace process with the ELN.

There are other aspects of Venezuela's crisis and its potential outcomes that could affect the Colombian peace process:

- An acute humanitarian crisis could draw attention to Uribe's argument that the peace accords will allow the FARC-EP to pursue a far-left agenda and take Colombia down the Venezuelan path.
- The impact of a military coup would depend on the actual figures involved. Overall, the Venezuelan military has traditionally been nationalist, anti-Colombian and anti-guerrilla. But the most likely military scenario would be a take-over by Chávez loyalists, many of whom are sympathetic to the Colombian guerrillas.
- If the opposition were to take power through a recall referendum or negotiated transition, Venezuela's role in the peace process would certainly change. Venezuela has participated in it as a relative ally of the FARC-EP. The politicians and parties affiliated with the Democratic Unity Roundtable – the opposition coalition known by its Spanish acronym, MUD, that won a parliamentary majority in last year's elections – have frequently criticised the Colombian peace process over the years, as they have almost any Maduro government initiative. This will probably subside once peace begins to consolidate. And they would certainly be closer to President Santos ideologically and favour cooperation on the border. But they would not have any rapport with the FARC-EP or ELN and could not facilitate these organisations' confidence in or cooperation with the peace process.
- Finally, whether or not there is a political transition, Venezuela will likely be in crisis for the next couple of years. Thus, it is unlikely to be able provide support for the consolidation of peace in Colombia or provide the control of border areas necessary to consolidate guerrilla demobilisation.

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