

Venezuelan Government Rejects Colombia's Efforts to Join NATO

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After Colombian president Juan Santos announced on the weekend that his government intended to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Venezuelan and other Latin American governments responded with concern for the region's peace.

Santos said that, "in the month of June, NATO will sign an agreement with the Colombian government, with the defence minister, in order to start a process of ... cooperation, with the intention of joining the organisation". (Santos at military ceremony, right)

In an army promotion ceremony, Santos said Colombia has the "right to think big" and, if we "achieve peace; our army is in the best position to be able to distinguish itself at an international level".

✘ However, EFE reported that Colombia's defence minister, Juan Carlos Pinzon said that although the country would extend its "cooperation" with NATO, he ruled out the possibility of membership of the alliance. The newspaper also reported an anonymous representative of NATO saying Colombia could not join it for geographic reasons; it "doesn't meet the criteria".

However the anonymous source apparently said that NATO is preparing an agreement with Colombia "to enable the exchange of classified information" and "future cooperation".

On Monday a U.S State Department official, Roberta Jacobson, said "our goal is certainly to support Colombia as being a capable and strong member of lots of different international organizations, and that might well include NATO".

"Ultimately this is a decision that all of the NATO members would have to make," she added.

Then finally, late last night, Pinzon clarified again that the aim of the Colombian government is not to join NATO, but to become "a partner of cooperation as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and other countries are".

Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro initially described Colombia's apparent intention to join NATO as an "abhorrent idea" aimed at "expanding NATO's war plans...to South America". He called on the Colombian government to "reflect" on the move.

"It's more than a doubt, I can now say with certainty that president Santos isn't interested

any more in the peace process," Maduro said, referring to Santos' recent meeting with Venezuelan former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, who still has not recognised Maduro as president. Following that meeting, the Venezuelan government said it would re-evaluate its supportive role in the peace talks between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Maduro also said he agreed with Bolivian president Evo Morales' proposal to hold a meeting of defence ministers of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) countries, to evaluate the "threat to peace and stability" that Colombia's move represents. The Nicaraguan government also criticised Colombia's intentions.

Also today, the general secretary of the Paraguayan Communist Party, Najeeb Amado, told press that Santos' declaration was a "continuation of Plan Colombia, a United States war strategy for South America".

However, following the clarification by Pinzon, Maduro said that Venezuela welcomed it, and it was a "positive step" towards maintaining peaceful relations between the two countries.

Today, ex Colombian minister for defence and foreign trade, Martha Ramirez, said the Colombian government had "improvised" in its bid to join NATO, "exposing Colombians to international ridicule" because Colombia can't enter the organisation "by definition".

NATO is a military alliance based on the North Atlantic Treaty signed in 1949. Member countries agree to mutual defence in response to external attacks. It has 28 member states across North America and Europe, with other countries participating in its "Partnership for Peace" and in dialogue programs. The combined military budgets of all NATO members constitutes over 70% of global defence expenditure.

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