

Washington's "Dual Imperial Strategy" in Latin America: Breakdown of the Colombia-Venezuela - FARC Peace Process

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, June 07, 2013

Introduction

Washington has devised a dual strategy toward Latin America . This involves a new set of ambitious imperial initiatives designed to undermine the principal anti-imperialist governments (Venezuela), social movements and armed insurgency (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), while dismantling Latin America-centered integration and regional alliances, such as ALBA, Petro-Caribe, UNASUR and MERCOSUR. At the same time the US seeks to establish an alternative US-centered 'integration scheme' through the Latin America and Asia-the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which encourages closer ties among neo-liberal states, like Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Chile with their energy and mining sector-dependent development strategies.

The involvement of Colombia is crucial to both of these 'high priority' objectives. In order to grasp the centrality of Colombia to current US strategy, it is essential to analyze the interplay of military, economic and political interests of the White House and Bogota .

US and Colombia

Washington's interests in Colombia are largely defined by the policies it has pursued: The last three US Presidents have poured over \$7 billion in military aid, building seven military bases and stationing several thousand rotating and permanent US military advisers to 'advanced combat zones'. Colombia 's military has more than doubled in size to over 350,000 soldiers. In this context, Colombia has acted as an armed surrogate for US foreign policy, overtly intervening via cross border operations in Ecuador and Venezuela and serving as a platform for logistical and surveillance operations in the Caribbean, Andean, Amazonian and mid Pacific regions. US military interests are reinforced by economic ties, which have deepened via a bilateral free trade agreement and Bogota 's open embrace of large scale mining and energy exploitation.

Washington 's military strategists and ruling class allies in Colombia , however, face formidable opposition from three sources - two internal and one external. Internally, there is a vast alliance of social movements encompassing dispossessed peasants, farmers, and Indo and Afro-Colombian organizations, which have joined forces with trade unions, student confederations and human rights groups to oppose the civilian-military rulers who represent an elite 5% in control of over 70% of Colombia's wealth. Over 4.5 million peasants, who have been driven from their lands by the scorched earth 'counter-insurgency' policies devised by US and Israeli military strategists, are clamoring for their right to return to their farmsteads. Despite decades of repression and horrific massacres committed by the

military and state-sponsored paramilitary death squads (Colombia has the world's highest ongoing homicide rate of trade unionists), the regime in Bogota faces rising social and political opposition.

The second challenge comes from two armed popular insurgencies: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). These armed organizations, especially the FARC, have significant grass-roots support for their programs, especially with regard to popular demands for agrarian reform, the de-militarization of the countryside, redistribution of wealth and the end of state terror.

The third challenge to the Columbian regime is external-the advanced socio-economic policies of the Chavista government in Venezuela :the housing, agrarian, health, educational, employment and anti-poverty programs stand in stark contrast to the neoliberal, authoritarian practices of Columbia 's ruling elite

While US military policy has strengthened the capacity of the state to repress civil society organizations and contain civil unrest, it has not defeated the decades-old armed insurgency. This military failure has had serious implications for the current Santos regime as it turns toward a new economic model, based on attracting large-scale, long-term foreign capital to the extractive sector (mining and energy sector). The FARC, in particular, is strong in the regions targeted for major mining investments and poses a threat to the 'security' of big capital.

The 'Transition' from Uribe to Santos : Continuity and Change

The transition from the Uribe presidency to the Santos regime was marked by strategic and structural continuities and sharp tactical changes. Santos maintained and even strengthened Colombia 's economic and military links with the US , retaining the US military bases, its extensive military advisory missions and the bilateral free trade agreement. Like ex-President Uribe, President Santos is an avid advocate and promoter of the 'extractive capitalist model'. In fact this was a major consideration in his decisions to modify his tactical approach to the FARC and to offer to negotiate a peace settlement.

Santos ' tactical changes in defense of his strategic links with the US and his big push toward extractive capital are twofold: He has agreed to enter into peace negotiations and recognize the FARC as a 'belligerent'. Secondly, he reached an agreement with then President Chavez in which they agreed to end hostilities including political intervention and cross border incursions and to expand trade and commercial relations between Colombia and Venezuela . In essence, the agreement meant that Colombia would no longer provide material support and sanctuary for right-wing US-backed terrorists and politicians engaged in destabilizing Venezuela 's democratic regime, while Venezuela agreed to cut off any formal or informal support to the FARC and to "encourage" the FARC to negotiate with the Santos regime on the basis of a relatively moderate agenda.

Santos ' partial shift away from Uribe's total war tactics to a negotiations plus war approach was based on several crucial factors. In the first place, Santos recognized that the FARC could not be decisively defeated on the battlefield and that the continuation of the armed conflict especially in the regions with the richest mineral and energy resources endangered the centerpiece of his extractive capital-centered development model. Secondly, in the preliminary negotiations with the FARC, Santos established an agenda, which rules out any reform of the extractive, agro-business and financial sectors - an agenda approved by the

Venezuelan and Cuban envoys. Thirdly, Santos believes he can impose a time limit on negotiations pressuring the FARC to make concessions which would limit 'agrarian reform' especially with regard to the implementation and administration of the socio-economic changes and thereby fail to protect the peasant beneficiaries in the contested areas from the death squads.

Santos' decision to 'reconcile' with Venezuela and to end the de-facto confrontational posture of his predecessor Uribe is based on several considerations: Uribe's belligerency had reduced Colombia's annual trade with Venezuela from \$8 billion to less than \$1.5 billion - affecting key cattle and grain exporters, manufacturers, banking and commercial interests. Secondly, sustained hostility towards Venezuela had isolated Colombia from the rapidly expanding Latin American integration process. Thirdly, Santos saw few if any possibilities of a successful military coup in Caracas or of a direct US intervention. In effect Santos, while retaining all of his ties to the US, seeks to use a diplomatic and political process to accomplish what Uribe failed to realize through bellicose threats and a scorched earth campaign: the preservation of the economic order, the disarming of the FARC, and the retention of strategic military ties with the Pentagon. Under the guise of 'peaceful co-existence', Santos has sought to keep his covert links to the Venezuelan political opposition as they plot to destabilize the Maduro government.

The Rise and Decline of Peace Negotiations and Peaceful Co-Existence

For the first six months of 2013, the peace negotiations between the Santos regime and the FARC proceeded through controversy and agreements. The FARC negotiators and the Colombian government officials announced 'progress' while the Cubans and Venezuelans praised the process and were especially optimistic of a peaceful resolution.

However, on the front lines facing the Colombian death squads, many human rights, trade union and peasant movement leaders denounced the continued, daily campaign of repression, including the assassination of dozens of activists. Everyone was asking if the peace settlement was going to be a replay of the horrible massacres which followed the peace agreements of 1984-88 where 3,000 former-guerrillas entered open legal political activity and were murdered by military and paramilitary death squads. During the six months of the current peace negotiations, several tens of thousands of Colombian workers, peasants and salaried workers have joined mass marches and attended 'consultative assemblies' debating and formulating proposals for changes in land tenure, labor legislation, environmental regulations on mining and protection of indigenous communities. In the same time period, the armed forces, police, paramilitary and landowners' private thugs have murdered, arrested, kidnapped, "disappeared" and threatened several hundred peasant activists who have attempted to 'reclaim' their own lands as well as trade unionists engaged in collective bargaining. Activists participating in the 'Patriotic March' in defense of the peace process have been targeted.

The Santos regime is playing a clever complex political game: appearing to be flexible in peace negotiations with the FARC leaders in Havana while continuing repression at home against popular civil society movements who seek reforms in their communities and maintaining a full military offensive against the guerrillas in the field.

The deep continuities between Santos and Uribe have been underestimated by many supporters of the peace process. The similarities are most striking when we analyze what is

excluded from the negotiating agenda, namely, the absence of any discussion of the nature of the Colombian state which will oversee the implementation of peace agreements. So far, the state under Santos continues to act as the enforcer for the agro-mineral elite and in every conflict between landlords and peasants, mine owners and workers and land grabbers and Indians, Bogota has taken the side of the elite.

There is a vast gap between the reforms Santos promises and the violence his generals practice. This raises fundamental questions about the so-called “transition” between ex-President Uribe, the narco-assassin, and “peacemaker” Santos .

Santos two-track policy toward Venezuela , of talking co-existence while practicing political destabilization, exploded in late May when the Colombian regime met with Henrique Capriles, the defeated Venezuelan Presidential candidate. Capriles continues to reject the results of internationally monitored election. Instead he has organized violent assaults killing eleven government supporters and refuses to accept the legitimacy of the government. This is in line with Washington 's policy of a ‘war of attrition’. By formally meeting with Capriles, Santos is giving Bogota 's support to a key political instrument in the US campaign to destabilize the elected government of Venezuela . The Capriles- Santos overtures have destroyed the latter’s pretense of reconciliation, peaceful coexistence and non-interference! Santos ' double-game of securing Venezuela 's compliance in non-intervention while practicing blatant intervention and recognizing a violent proxy of US policy against Caracas highlights his fundamental hostility against the Maduro government.

The Venezuelan government was forced to wake up and denounce Santos duplicity calling him a “back-stabber”, recalling its envoy to the peace talks in Havana and threatening to reduce Colombia 's multi-billion dollar trade with Venezuela .

Santos has clearly overplayed his hand in this episode, exposing his continuation of the previous Uribe regimes’ destabilization strategies. All the contradictions and continuities of Santos tenure in office came to the surface; peaceful coexistence is a pretext for political intervention via Capriles; commercial ties to Venezuela are subordinate to military links to the US ; peace agreements are a weapon to a drive a wedge between the FARC and Venezuela .

Santos meeting with Capriles and the subsequent blow up of relations with Venezuela has raised severe doubts about the entire “post-Uribe” scenario: both in terms of Colombian-Venezuelan relations and the possibility of negotiating a political settlement with the FARC. The ‘honey-moon’ is over.

Reflections on the Santos-FARC Peace Dialogue

The FARC leadership negotiating in Havana has expressed ‘concern’ over the breakdown of relations between Colombia and Venezuela . Surprisingly the FARC refrained from denouncing Santos ' meeting with Capriles as a gross intervention into Venezuelan politics. Instead it insisted on the urgency of “reconstructing the confidence required to continue the peace process”, ignoring the fact that the entire peace process will disappear if Santo-Capriles succeed in undermining the Maduro government!

The “advances”, which the FARC claims, “have been achieved via dialogue” especially with regard to “integral agrarian reform” are at best ambiguous.

The text of the agreement between the FARC and the Santos regime excludes the expropriation of large productive agro-business plantations, which occupy the most fertile, irrigated and market-accessible lands.

The agreement specifies that only “unproductive lands” will be “made available” to displaced and landless peasants. Previous experiences with this type of clause have resulted in costly and extensive litigation, as landowners can claim the presence of one cow per ten acres constitutes ‘productive land’. Landowners have been known to sub-divide their large estates among extended family members, reducing the ‘size’ of the property below the acreage designated for expropriation. Moreover, the entire process of identifying uncultivated land and initiating expropriation proceedings will depend on regional judicial and administrative officials who are currently aligned with the landed elite – backed by private armies.

Land, which is designated unproductive, tends to be the least fertile, inaccessible to markets and agricultural services and lacking irrigation. In the past, peasants were settled in “frontier lands” which required huge initial investments, as well as the development of new public roads and transport services – making survival difficult. Given that the Santos regime’s highest priority is to invest heavily in the extractive sector it is unlikely that small peasant farms will receive adequate funding. More likely, the displaced and landless peasants will be ‘settled’ on poor quality land and told to fend for themselves.

Even assuming that many of the 4.5 million peasant families, dispossessed by the regimes’ scorched earth policy, recover their land – as per the Santos-FARC agreement – experience has shown that the narco-paramilitary and military landowners will use force and violence to retain control. Repossession of land will require the robust intervention of state power ... unlikely under the current legal-military order. The text of the agreement is vague and ambiguous with regard to the entire enforcement mechanisms, and their legal and political basis.

The success or failure of agrarian reform depends on the power and organization of the peasant beneficiaries. Establishing new land-reform settlements parallel to established large agro-business owners organized in powerful cattle, coffee and grain associations will likely lead to a sharp polarization of power and a struggle over access to public financial and technical assistance. The agreement specifies important social programs involving health, education, housing and poverty reduction. Such programs will only succeed if there is a shift in political power from the current dominant agro-business elite to the peasant beneficiaries of the new land reform. These agreements do not address the great imbalances in socio-economic power currently shaping public policy.

Given the absence of any changes in land tenure with regard to productive fertile lands, given the absence of any shifts in the balance of state power in rural areas, it is not surprising that US Vice-President Joseph Biden has expressed his enthusiastic support for the peace negotiations. No doubt both Biden and Obama were more than delighted that Santos embraced their client Capriles, much to the chagrin of the incredulous Venezuelan Foreign Office.

The turn of events in Venezuelan-Colombian relations raises powerful tensions and splits across the political spectrum throughout Latin America. Progressive leaders in the region have denounced the Capriles-Santos-Washington axis. The advances in peace negotiations – as limited as they are – have no possibility of leading to a peace settlement in the face of a

revival of cross border animosities.

The question is whether Santos wants to sacrifice Colombia 's annual \$10 billion dollars worth of trade with Venezuela and the on-going peace negotiations with the FARC, involving marginal social reforms, and intensify the country's internal conflict jeopardizing his "extractive export model" in order to serve as Washington 's proxy in destabilizing Venezuela .

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