UNASUR IN A COMPARATIVE LIGHT: THE RELATIONS WITH VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA

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Introduction

The goal of this article is to examine, in a comparative perspective, the relation of Venezuela and Colombia recent governments with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Since the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, the self-nominated “Bolivarian Revolution” in Venezuela is seen as the most radical process of change amongst the countries that constituted the so-called progressive wave in South America, intensified with the presidential inauguration of Lula da Silva in Brazil and Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, in 2003. In those years, the Colombian political scenario went through a different inflexion, one that accentuated the proximity of this country with the United States. In the last years of the 20th century, Plan Colombia was conceived, which led to the break of peace negotiations between the State, under the administration of Andrés Pastrana, and the insurgence. The militarist approach to deal with the internal conflict accentuated with the election of Álvaro Uribe, in 2002, that coincided with the rise of the rhetoric of war on terror on the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001 in the United States.

It was in this context, in which Colombia and Venezuela were identified as the polarities of South American politics, that UNASUR was created in 2008. This article will restore some aspects of the Venezuelan foreign policy in that moment, emphasizing its relations with UNASUR and Brazil, in the light of its project of regional integration. Then, we will present a similar analysis regarding Colombia, emphasizing the inflexion on the country’s regional policy due to the choice of peace negotiations made by Santos government.

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By keeping up with the evolution of the relation of Venezuela and Colombia with UNASUR, in a period that coincided with Partido dos Trabalhadores’ (PT) administrations in Brazil, it is evident the moderate orientation of this institution, that faced the initial hostility of Uribe’s government but did not endorse the radical pretensions of chavism. As a whole, the result of this analysis indicates a paradoxical situation, once the symbolical organization of the South American progressive wave seems to be more important nowadays to consolidate peace in Santos’ Colombia, than to help Venezuela overcome the crisis that threatens the continuity of bolivarianism under Maduro, which is suggested by the contrasting expectations between these governments when it comes to UNASUR’s role regarding the challenges they face.

Even though the creation of UNASUR resulted from the convergence of efforts from various governments and should not be seen as a mere extension of the Brazilian regional policy, the significant convergence of postures adopted in these first years by UNASUR and the conciliatory orientation of the foreign policy practiced by PT administrations in Brazil, causes a reflection upon the reach and the limits of this orientation, in a moment when the reflux of the regional progressive wave invites to problematize its legacy.

Venezuela

Seen in a continental perspective, the election of Hugo Chávez to the presidency in 1998 reveals a pattern, in which the implementation of the neoliberal agenda led to a sharp wear of conventional parties, opening space to the election of alternative candidates. In some cases, parties historically identified as leftists were elected, as Frente Amplio in Uruguay and Partido dos Trabalhadores in Brazil, meanwhile in other countries new figures triumphed, seen as alternatives to the prevalent politics, as Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador. In this context, the singularity of the Venezuelan process was the determination with which its President faced the constraints to social change, progressively radicalizing the self nominated “Bolivarian Revolution”, when its congeners frequently stepped back from their original purposes and restrained neoliberal management (Webber, Carr 2013).

Initially, this radicalization emerged as an answer to the conflicts resulting from the government’s intention to take back control of oil surplus. It was fundamentally this dispute, and not the constituent process, that initiated coup attempt of April 2002, reverted by the conjunction of popular reaction and the action of military loyal to the President. In the following months, the oppositionist offensive took the form of a lockout, that had as an axis the inter-
ruption of oil exports with the standstill of the state-owned company PDVSA (Maringoni 2004).

Besides the success in destabilizing the economy, provoking a fall of 27% in the GDP of the first semester of 2003, the resulting political balance of the clash decisively inclined the correlation of political forces in favor of the government. Determined to revert the anti national inclination of the oil policy practiced since 1975, the government realized a purge in PDVSA, firing about 18 thousand employees from a total of 42 thousand. At the same time, social politics were intensified, especially with the so called misiones, that answered to the double will of attending denied popular demands and stimulating organic basis of support to the regime, in a process that counted with the decisive participation of the army, against the obstacles that state bureaucracy put in the relation with chavism (Monedero 2013, 18).

In the regional plan, the clashes that resulted in a initial radicalization of chavism coincided with the moment when Lula da Silva assumed the presidency of Brazil and Nestor Kirchner, the government of Argentina, both in 2003. Identified with the popular repulse to neoliberalism, these heads of State pointed to a new era in South American relations, signaling the strengthening of the bond between the countries of the region, as a way to sovereignty. In particular, the new Brazilian government would act with force in this direction. Chancellor Celso Amorim announced that the compromise with regional integration was characterized by a “sharp consciousness of the interdependence between the destinies of Brazil and our south american neighbors” (Amorim 2004).

In this context, the failure of the negotiations to implement the Free Trade Area of the Americas, evidenced in the Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata in 2005, was seen as a victory of the progressive governments against the interests of the United States. In the following years, the progressive wave would be strengthened with the election of Tabare Vázquez in Uruguay (2005), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007) and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay (2008). It was during this potential counter-hegemonic movement in the region that UNASUR was constituted in 2008, an organization that had as its first Secretary-General the former Argentine president, Nestor Kirchner.

However, this narrative can be problematized when seen from the Bolivarian point of view and of the relations of this country with PT administrations in Brazil. Kenneth Ramírez proposes to analyse these relations from three distinct moments, described alternatively as convergence periods, between 2005 and 2007; differentiation, between 2008 and 2013; and, from this year and beyond, administration of the crisis (Ramírez 2015).
The first period, marked by attempts to build consensus among countries, extended from the dissolution of FTAA and the establishment of UNASUR. In the internal plan, during those years the Bolivarian process witnessed an ideological radicalization, which is expressed in the incorporation of an anti-imperialist rhetoric in 2003, leading to the proposition of a Bolivarian socialism announced since 2004, that some will describe as a “socialism of the 21st century” (Dietrich 2005). This counter-hegemonic orientation will gain new strength with the proposition of the Communal State from 2006 onwards.

This last proposal indicated the desire of rooting the process in a popular basis, extending beyond the State apparatus, the Army and Chávez himself. For this reason, the Vice-Minister of the Popular Power for Communes and Social Movements, Alexis Toledo, said that his ministry “had to have a finite existence” (Toledo 2014). However, this movement was not consensual among the own Chávez’s basis, once the decentralization of State power contradicted the rationality inherent to the military centralism and also countered the interest of many parties of bolivarianism, that now were part of state power (Figueroa 2015). This fissure, that evidenced the tensions between the strengthening of the State and of popular democracy, that have always accompanied chavism, explains the only electoral setback witnessed by its leader: the defeat in the popular consultation of 2006, that intended to deepen the movement in this second direction.

In the international plan, an alternative policy flourished, emphasizing regional integration as part of a strategy towards multipolarity, signalized with the launching of ALBA in 2004 (originally “Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas”) in counterposition to FTAA, the constitution of Petrocaribe in 2005, the accession in Mercosur in 2006, finalized in 2012, added to the strengthening of relations with countries such as China, Iran, Russia and Belarus. Even though superficially ALBA seems to converge with the “sharp consciousness of the interdependence between the destinies of Brazil and our South American neighbors” described by Amorim, the biggest country of the subcontinent never thought about adhering to the initiative. There were two fundamental reasons for that, an economic and a political one.

From a substantive point of view, ALBA signaled to an integration that went beyond the commercial dimension, involving fields like education, health, culture, communication, among others (Aponte, Amézquita 2015). The exchange of Venezuelan oil for Cuban doctors and the creation of the television channel Telesur, even though not directly connected to ALBA, are emblematic of this intention. In the economic field, innovative ideas were proposed, like a single system of regional compensation (SUCRE), that aimed
to mitigate regional dependence on a strong currency; or the formation of joint investment companies, like Petrocaribe. The singularity of the initiative was summed up in the following lines: “ALBA choose the logic of commercial cooperation, solidarity exchange and economic complementarity between different national productive structures as general principles of its philosophy, in an effort to extend the revolutionary solidarity across the continent” (Cerezal, Simarro, Soler 2013c 152).

Last but not least, by proposing a comprehensive Latin America (and not South American) integration that transcended the mercantile dimension, ALBA signaled for the construction of an alternative political project to the continent. It is no accident that Cuba is the country that quickly followed Venezuela, subscribing the original bloc declaration in december of 2004 (Espinosa 2013, 303).

However, this logic did not find resonance in the Brazilian project, in which the wish for a multipolar world was not translated into political radicalization. The economic substrate of PT’s policy of regional integration was the strategy to support the internationalization of big enterprises of national capital or based in the country, understood as the vector of the national capitalist development: is the policy of the “national champions”. This support was materialized especially through a business diplomacy, performed by Itamaraty, and by BNDES (National Bank for Economic and Social Development) credit policy. In general, PT rationality understands that the internationalization of Brazilian corporations would serve as a material basis to regionally project the country’s influence, modifying its international insertion pattern. In one word, it would turn Brazil into a global player.

From this point of view, ALBA was of little economic interest to Brazil, once it did not bring enough attractive business with it (Cerezal 2015). In the political dimension, the initiative was interpreted as a project that answered to Venezuelan, and not Latin American, interests. Furthermore, this country’s protagonism was seen as rivaling the projection desired by Brazil, despite the personal empathy between Chávez and Lula (Ramírez 2015; Ramos 2015).

When seen from this standpoint, the creation of UNASUR agreed in 2007 should not be seen as the height of a political convergence between governments identified with the progressive wave on the subcontinent, but it should be interpreted as one among many Brazilian initiatives that limited the geopolitical reach of ALBA. As a result, in practice the Venezuelan counter hegemonic pretensions were neutralized. Considering this scenario, Ramírez says that, from the Brazilian point of view, in reality chavista Venezuela was always a “thorn in the side” (Ramírez 2015).

The political rationality inherent to UNASUR, as defended by the
Brazilian diplomacy, is clearly opposite to ALBA, since this one seeks the lowest possible common denominator to be reached between countries. Clearly, the reach of an organization that gathers countries with different politics, such as Venezuela and Colombia in the creation of UNASUR, would be limited. This restriction is reinforced by the type of the decision adopted, that has to be consensual, answering to a Colombian requirement that hereafter limits the innovation capability of the entity. Faced by this reality, UNASUR performance tends to be limited to the political sphere (Sanahuja 2012) and more specifically to the solution of problems in member countries that may have regional implications, as we will analyze later in the Colombian case.

The Brazilian lack of interest limited the reach of ALBA to Andean countries governed by progressive Presidents, Bolivia and Ecuador, besides Cuba, Nicaragua and some Caribbean islands: Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. However, the innovative character of the initiative was considerably restrict and frequently resumed to an oil diplomacy, in which the supply of oil with low costs brought the expectations of sympathetic relations with Venezuela in international organizations. So, during the crisis initiated by the expulsion of Colombians from Venezuela in August 2015 that led to the closure of the country’s borders, the Colombian proposal for OAS to mediate a meeting between the countries, contrary to Venezuelan interests, was defeated by one vote. On the other side, the policy realized by Venezuela through ALBA and Petrocaribe lacks reciprocity. In the middle of an economic crisis that started in 2013, the country was forced to sell, with substantive discount, debts to receive from Jamaica and Dominican Republic (Cerezal 2015). Even the engagement of Bolivia commanded by Morales in ALBA has been instrumental, mainly attracted by Venezuelan resources that are now scarce (Villegas 2015).

It is in this perspective that the second moment of recent relations between Brazil and Venezuela is understood, marked by the determination to moderate the radical potential of the Bolivarian process, aiming to neutralize its regional projection. As a consequence of these dynamics, it was not Brazil who approached ALBA, but it was Chávez who adhered to Mercosur, an organization whose orientation he had frequently criticized, naming it as neoliberal. At the same time, the Bolivarian relinquished to the Brazilian perspective over UNASUR as a regional umbrella organization with a dominant political character, that imposed itself over the desire of an anti-neoliberal regional integration envisioned by its leader (Sanahuja 2012). In both cases, Venezuela accepted the limited benefits these initiatives offered as a counter-
weight to US virulence, in an unfavorable global context to alternative projects to neoliberalism, in particular the ones with socialist inspiration.

A second characteristic of the differentiation between the Brazilian strategy in relation to Venezuela is related to the proposition of a “new regional financial architecture” that was present in that moment. The creation of COSIPLAN as an UNASUR organism in 2009, to which IIRSA was subordinated, fed the expectation to invert the original rationality of the portfolio projects associated to the initiative, referred to open regionalism. Under the aegis of UNASUR, it was intended to give the institution a diverse meaning, referred to developmental regionalism, understood as a type of integration that would promote “the physical integration between the countries, a fundamental step to the integration of production chains of suppliers and related producers, aiming at the formation of scale economies and the own integration of South American societies” (Desidera Neto and Teixeira 2012, 32).

In economic terms, this challenge implied minimizing the role of multilateral institutions that conceived the initiative, the Inter American Development Bank (IDB), the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) and the Fondo Financiero para el Desarrollo de la Cuenca del Plata (FONPLATA). This was due to the fact that the strictly merchant logic that guided these institutes prevented the investment in works relevant for regional integration, but that would be less profitable. This presence should be counterweighted with the role of other financing organisms, notably the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES). Simultaneously, proposals emerged in the direction of a new regional financial architecture, guided to reduce the region’s dependence in relation to international financial institutions. It was in this context that the Bank of the South was created in 2009, with the formal accession of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela (Aponte García 2015).

However, the proposition of this new financial architecture has been blocked since then by Brazil itself. In this country, the Central Bank and the Department of Treasury still challenge the use of international reserves to finance investment. Meanwhile, it continues to receive a 1% interest in US treasury bonds, even though at the other end of this financial engineering the world’s highest interest rate is paid (Barros 2015). Although one of the main proponent of the new architecture, the Ecuadorian economist Pedro Paes, minimizes this question arguing that the contribution of international reserves would be preceded by numerous measures that do not imply onus of this nature to the countries (Paes 2015), the perception that prevails is that the Bank of the South did not work out because of political reasons: the institution predicts equal voting power to countries independent of the contribution
they make, in a different model from FMI’s. This arrangement would not be
of any interest to the intended Brazilian leadership, what evidences the power
motivations underlying the regional integration discourse (Acosta 2015).

Making comments on this situation, the Brazilian representative in
IIRSA meetings stated that the problem of Bank of the South was that Vene-
zuela wanted money to invest in non-refundable education and social projects
(Parkinson 2015). According to Ramírez, Chancellor Celso Amorim would
have said that he did not like “done deals”, suggesting that the bank would
have been designed in default of Brazilian interest (Ramírez 2015).

With the presidential inauguration of Dilma Rousseff in 2011, the dif-
ferentiation of policies between Venezuela and Brazil would have accelerated.
This movement was also motivated by personal questions, such as the small
interest of the President for international politics and even for her supposed
discomfort in relation to Chávez background and to the protagonism of the
military institution in his government (Ramos 2015).

However, the crisis that intensified with the death of Chávez in March
2013, followed by the election of Nicolás Maduro by a narrow margin, caused
another inflexion on the relation of PT governments with bolivarianism. The
Brazilian stance, always moderate, since then, started to press for regime re-
form. It was in this scenario, that Lula wrote a letter, delivered by Marco Au-
relio Garcia one year after the death of Chávez, advising Maduro to accept
his role as a reformist of Chávez’ legacy, instead of intending to be a sec-
ond Chávez (Ramírez 2015). According to Lula, in a context where UNASUR
offered to mediate the dialogue with the opposition “Maduro should try to
lessen the political debate to fully dedicate himself to govern, to establish a
coalition policy, to build a minimal program and to reduce the tension (...) 
Venezuela should have a five-year pact to work against blackouts, fight against
inflation and to be self sufficient in food production” (Lula 2014).

In that moment, the government faced supply problems, growing in-
flation (60% in 2013) and a foreign exchange imbalance, expressed in a no-
table disparity between the different currency bands practiced, and the price
of dollar in the black market – all problems that would get even worse in
the following years. Retrospectively, the vulnerabilities of the proposal recom-
mended by Lula to Maduro, involving a coalition policy, a social pact and the
lessening of tensions, got evident in the evolution of the Brazilian situation
itself. But in that circumstance, moderated critics of the regime resounded
the advices of the Brazilian leader: “This model can result in a vibrating and
non-polarized democracy, a competitive economy with social inclusion and
and ‘active and assertive foreign policy – such as Lula himself enjoyed say-
ing” (Ramírez 2014). Actually, the counterpoint between chavism and Lula
was not new: while watching the anti-Chávez manifestation in 2006, I was approached by many Venezuelans that complimented Lula in contrast to their President.

Maduro did not follow this alternative, for several reasons. He mainly fought for the social conquests of the processes and resisted the pressures for economic reform because he was afraid of the social costs of the known alternatives, all of them of anti popular and anti national characteristics. To give an example, the economist based in Harvard, Ricardo Hausman, has been the spokesperson of a two-way summed path: the default to the Chinese that had already bought Venezuelan oil futures, and the rapprochment with the United States and the IMF. Hausman suggestion include selling food received by the country from international donations in order to make cash (Hausman 2016). However, faced by the fast degradation of day to day Venezuelan conditions, even analysts that are sympathetic to the process question if the subsequent political wear would not have been higher than the social cost of changes (Lander 2015).

During the parliamentary elections in Venezuela, in the 6th of December 2015, the inflation was estimated in 150% according to non official data, since the government did not publicize figures throughout the year. The shortage problems worsened and the foreign exchange imbalance increased: in the official exchange the dollar was quoted to 6.30 bolivars, while in the black market it exceeded the mark of 800 bolivars for one dollar. The International Monetary Fund forecasted a recession around 10% for the country in the year (Ramos 2015).

These elections were surrounded by expectations and tension. It was feared that the government would lose its parliamentary majority, suffering its first defeat in the ballots since the 2006 consultation. Depending on the setback magnitude, it may lead to a recall referendum, that could abbreviate Maduro’s term.

Against this backdrop, the opposition rose its tone, denouncing the possibility of fraud. Then, the government opened negotiations for the coming of international missions that could testify the process’ legitimacy. Rejecting the participation of OAS, largely identified with the United States, the Venezuelan government bet all its fortune in a UNASUR mission. However, the negotiation process unleashed was turbulent and many felt Brazil’s participation as hostile.

In general lines, there was a verbal proposal associated to the President of the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court (TSE), Dias Toffoli, at that time, proposing a mission of UNASUR observers chiefed by Nelson Jobim. This proposal was not well received in Venezuela because Toffoli had recently re-
ceived well-known figures of the anti constitutional opposition, that defends the immediate and, if necessary, violent destitution of Maduro – known as *la salida*. It is the case of the wives of Leopoldo Lopez and Antonio Ledezma, that were arrested. Furthermore, it was suspected that Jobim himself was unfriendly to the Bolivarian process (Constant 2015; Urbina 2015).

According to the national coordinator of Venezuela in UNASUR, Elvis Urbina, the pro-tempore presidency of the entity, that in that moment was exercised by Uruguay, transmitted the Venezuelan request for more names as a veto to Jobim (Urbina 2015). As a reaction, Toffoli declared that TSE would not participate in any electoral mission in Venezuela, what put the country in a difficult situation, because it counted with this presence to evaluate the process for the international community. The impotence of the PT government to revert this situation caused a deep discomfort amongst Bolivarians, referring to the feeling that the South American neighbor was abandoning Venezuela. At the same time, Venezuelan negotiators questioned the harsh conditions proposed by UNASUR, that, in their vision, imposed exceptional clauses in relation to international law and to inter american law (Constant 2015).

As a whole, the feeling that the Brazilian political crisis accentuated the distance from the PT administration in relation to the Bolivarian process prevailed, in a moment that the Dilma government was making growing concessions to conservative sectors, expecting to sustaing her mandate. Simultaneously, Cuba reacted to the Venezuelan crisis by accelerating the rapprochement with the United States. Ramírez, including, creates the hypothesis that the sanctions to Venezuela were used as an exchange currency with Us republicans against the encirclment of Cuba (Ramírez 2015).

At the end, UNASUR sent a last minute mission, headed by the former Dominican President Leonel Fernández. This mission only endorsed what the Carter Institute had observed in all previous electoral processes: Venezuelan elections are one of the most reliable in the world. The overwhelming defeat of bolivarianism, that elected less than a third of the parliamentarians, attested this fact.

However, the difficulties faced in the relations with UNASUR and mostly with Brazil, in a crucial moment for the bolivarian process, left a bitter taste. As a diplomat of this country mentioned, friends are known in times of difficulty. The election of Macri in the same month of December, followed by the likely deposition of Dilma Rousseff, showed that this loneliness tends to grow.
Colombia

When UNASUR was established in 2008, Alvaro Uribe was in his second consecutive mandate as President of Colombia. In this country, like in Peru under Fujimori, the fight against guerillas already extinct in other parts served as a pretext for exception regimes, that condemned left forces to a defensive position that tended to isolation. In the last twenty years, Colombia and Peru composed with Chile, still marked by the legacy of dictatorship, a group of countries generically identified with a counterpoint to the progressive wave in South America.

However, more than an uninterested government in South American integration, Colombia under Uribe was seen as a threat to regional security and stability for its intimate association with the United States, inflated by the war on terror rhetoric incorporated on the fight against insurgency. Actually, the political ascension of Uribe was identified with the promiscuous relations between drug trafficking, paramilitarism and the Colombian politics, known in the country as “parapolitics” (Cepeda and Uribe 2014).

His first election in 2002 was fed by the failure of the peace negotiations made by the conservative Andrés Pastrana, in the demilitarized zone known as “el Caguán”. Beyond the historical obstacles to a democratic way out to the conflict, in that moment the determination of the paramilitarism to sabotage the negotiations was strong, expressing a sector of society that was opposed to any understanding. At the same time, the transnationals that paid taxes to the guerillas canalized resources much more substantial to American lobbies in favor of a military solution to the conflict. After all, the ambivalence of the government in this negotiation process, in which the conversations did not imply in a military truce, was evident in the adoption of Plan Colombia, in a moment when the dialogs were still in course².

In tune with the climate of “war on terror” that followed the 11/9 attacks, Uribe declared a stage of siege four days after his inauguration, at the same time he denied the political statute of the insurgency, implicitly recognized by previous governments. By categorizing the guerillas as terrorist organizations, the government denied the political roots of the conflict, asserting bases for a generalized criminalization of social protest (Estrada Álvarez 2014).

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² The Plan Colombia was an agreement conceived in 1999 between the administrations Clinton and Pastrana, predicting advisory and resources that converted the country in the third global receptor of US aid (after Israel and Egypt), under the pretext of combating drug trafficking. The plan contributed to bury the peace negotiations then in progress with the insurgence and potentialized the militarization of the colombian state (Oidhaco 2000).
The political project headed by Uribe instrumentalized class violence through a national interest ideology, expressed in the notion of “seguridad democrática”. Beyond poisoning the political environment with a discourse that criminalized the popular opposition, that was ostensibly replicated by the big press, it was intended to consolidate the subjective and objective basis of a project of power. In other words, the Uribe bloc proposed to dispute the hegemony over the country through a project that involves the political organization of a diversified and powerful sector of the Colombian society, that turns violence into a way of life and turns war into business:

Protected by a self defence discourse with which they intended to legitimate themselves, the paramilitary and their managers involved the poorest population in war, offering the possibility of social ascension in an adverse context, creating a regime of terror and complicity that, far from being limited by the counterinsurgency fight, allowed them to conquer lands, city halls, governments, congress seats, control and silence criticism, influence and participate in the economic activity and seek, as proposed by the ones that signed the celebrated Pacto de Ralito the “refoundation of the motherland”. (Cepeda and Uribe 2014: 76)

As expected, the military action initiated under the aegis of Plan Colombia was focused on the areas under the influence of the guerilla, with the regions dominated by narcotraffic and paramilitarism remaining untouched – the ones that served as a pretext for the plan. In 2004, similar to the original plan, the so called Plan Patriota was implemented, that contributed to regionalize the conflict. The apex of this tendency occurred in March 2008 when a base of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was bombed in Ecuadorian territory, killing twenty five guerrilla fighters – among these Raúl Reyes, one of the main leaders of the organization. This Colombian action provoked the rupture of diplomatic relations with Ecuador, meanwhile Venezuela called for consultations all of its entire diplomatic body in Bogota.

In that moment, the discomfort generated by the Colombian unilateral action created an opportunity for Brazil to advance the proposal of the creation of a South American Security Council bound to UNASUR, which was established in the following months. Initially, Colombia resisted in incorporating itself to the initiative. On the other hand, Venezuela intended to give concrete content to the Council, naming what would be, in its perspective, the risks and threats to regional security: the activation of the fourth US fleet, the military basis of this country on the region, narcotraffic and other forms of organized delinquency, fourth generation war, among others. However, the Brazilian proposal prevailed, that intended that the Council to be a forum of
dialogue and policy coordination. As a result, Colombia announced its accession to the proposal still in July 2008 (Comini 2015).

However, the discomforts generated by the policies adopted by Uribe rebounded in the following months, with the disclosure of an agreement predicting the assignment of seven military basis in Colombian territory for US use. In a meeting of heads of state of the recently formed UNASUR in Bariloche, in August 2009, Chávez read a document approved by the Pentagon five months ago, in which stressed out the country’s interest on the Palenque-ro basis, in Colombia. This meeting and the following ones were marked by tense negotiations, in which it was demanded that the country would advertise the terms of the deal, giving written guarantees that this foreign support would not be used to attempt against neighboring countries. Some interpreted the colombian intransigence in this respect, frequently seconded by the peruvian Alan García, as an attempt to break UNASUR itself (Bruzzone apud Luzzani: 382). In the end, the tensions dissipated: Colombia published the deal, that predicted inclusive legal immunity to US personnel, but did not give the expected written guarantees.

As a whole, the dissonant stance of Uribe in contrast with most of South American countries explains the late and reticent entrance of Colombia in UNASUR, such as its hesitation in joining the entity’s Security Council. Actually, the country had little interest in the organization, besides fearing that it was instrumentalized by the Venezuelan government – or by the “castrochavismo”, as Uribe used to say. Given this situation, it is plausible that the Colombian entry in UNASUR was based on a fundamentally negative motivation: the concern not to isolate itself (Betancourt Vélez 2015).

In practice, Uribe government radicalized a historical principle of the Colombian foreign policy known as Respice Polum (looking North), based on the premise of alignment with the United States (Pastrana and Vera 2012). Under Uribe, this orientation coincided with an identification with the Bush administration to an extent that the Colombian President publicized his support to McCain in the dispute against Obama, breaking the US consensus in relation to Colombia during the process. As a result, from 2008 on, when the democrats obtained majority in the Congress, the support to Plan Colombia diminished at the same time that conditions related to human rights and ambiental issues emerged, in addition to collecting research on false positives3 (Pastrana 2015). Besides the proximity with the United States, Uribe privileged relations with countries that classified insurgent groups as terrorists – which

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3 Young people dressed in guerrilla uniforms and murdered by the Army with the goal to make their executors obtain the government reward, stipulated in around U$ 1,900 in 2005 (Fundación Lazos de dignidad 2014).
is not the case of Brazil. The country cultivated close ties with Israel, especially in the security field, and so until today is the only country of the region that does not recognize the Palestinian State (De Currea-Lugo 2013).

In this framework, despite the accession to UNASUR, the relations with Venezuela remained tense until the end of Uribe government. While Chávez claimed the recognition of the belligerent status of FARC, Uribe denounced in July 2009 that the Venezuelan government had provided weapons to the insurgent group. Chávez claimed that the referred weapons had been bought in Sweden in the 1980s and that they would have been taken by FARC in an assault to a Venezuelan naval station in 1995. Chávez said that the equipment was worthless and accused the Colombian government of bad faith. In the beginning of 2010, Uribe returned the accusations, blaming the neighbor country in an OAS Assembly of covering FARC campings. The relations between the countries reached their lowest point, leading to the rupture of diplomatic relations in the moment Uribe ended his mandate.

Uribe attempts to run for a third presidential term were blocked, but the President elected as his successor Juan Manuel Santos, former Secretary of Defense of the government. Santos was a politician from a traditional lineage of the country’s dominant classes and won the elections in 2010 with a discourse of continuity in relation to the previous administration. Indeed, there were no substantial changes neither in the economic policy nor in the social programs, and the criminalization of the popular movements continued.

Notwithstanding, Santos made a different political reading on the Colombian situation, what led him to turn away from Uribe. The new President understood that the FARC had considerably weakened in the past years and that the context was favorable to negotiate peace. This perception corresponded to the interest of parts of the dominant classes, whose business would be favored by a peace environment in opposition to those who support Uribe and thrive in the midst of war (Alarcón 2014).

This reading had two main consequences: in the internal plan, the option to reopen the dialogue with FARC in Havana in 2012 provoked a distancing in relation to Uribe, that soon transformed into opposition. In fact, in the following presidential elections of 2014 the second shift between Santos and the candidate supported by Uribe, Oscar Iván Zuluaga, transformed into a plebiscite about the continuity or not of the peace negotiations.

An important second consequence was that the search for peace motivated a change in Santos’ foreign policy because he understood that to achieve this goal regional cooperation would be valuable, if not necessary – even if that did not mean any distancing from the US. As a consequence the
Colombian foreign policy, without depreciating OAS – a pan american forum where historically the US exercise dominant influence –, started to valorize UNASUR role.

Immediately, the new President sought, successfully, to distend the relations with Venezuela and Ecuador, as a premise to enrich the relations with other countries of the region. On the symbolic plan, the new orientation was expressed in the sharing of the mandate of UNASUR General Secretary between Colombia and Venezuela, following the death of Kirchner in the end of 2010. When this shared mandate ended in 2014, another Colombian assumed the highest post of the organization, the former president Ernesto Samper. According to the researcher Ronal Rodríguez, one of the consequences of this movement was that an international siege to FARC was closed, including leading Chávez to press the organization to sit in the negotiation table (Rodríguez 2015).

Another consequence of this process led by Santos was that UNASUR was disassociated of Chavism by the Colombian big press and the country’s public opinion. In the words of Londoño, the mistrusts related to UNASUR emptied (Londoño 2015).

However, the crisis initiated by the expulsion of Colombians from Venezuelan territory in August 2015 explained the topic’s sensitivity. Confronted with the expansion of paramilitarism in the country, in part played by Colombians, in that moment the Venezuelan government took the polemic decision of deporting 1,532 Colombians, according to United Nations (UN) data, and decreed the closure of the borders between the countries. On the whole, the action resulted in the return of at least 18,377 citizens to their country of origin for fear of the unfoldings of the situation, which was described by the Colombian State as a “humanitarian crisis” (Jara 2015).

I analyzed this crisis in other article (Santos 2015). Here, it is important to emphasize that a tweet from Samper sympathetic to the Venezuelan situation unleashed fierce criticism to its behavior and UNASUR itself. The tweet said: “A year ago we denounced the danger of the intromission of Colombian paramilitary in Venezuela. Today we confirm that it is a reality” (El Universal 2015).

This declaration was interpreted by the country’s big press as an endorsement to the Venezuelan version to the crisis. The expectation that Samper would take the Colombian side, incompatible with his role, initiated an intense mediatic attack to the General-Secretary and the organization as a whole. Angrier voices, like the one from the country’s former president and OAS former General-Secretary, Cesar Gaviria, proposed the country’s withdrawal from UNASUR. Meanwhile, sectors supported by Uribe instigated
chauvinism, accusing the Venezuelan government of proceeding “like Hitler did with the jews”, affirming that “the castrochavista dictatorship of Venezuela is dedicated to incite the hatred against Colombian people” (BBC 2015).

The balance of the controversy, in the wake of what was described by a Colombian diplomat as the “unlucky tweet” of Samper, was that UNASUR political pledge to interfere on the crisis had emptied (Jara 2015). On the other hand, as seen previously, Venezuela neutralized the Colombian demand on OAS. After all, the crisis was addressed in a bilateral way with the mediation of the Ecuadorian chancellor Ricardo Patiño.

Besides the histrionic threats made on this context, frequently for internal consumption, it is unlikely that Colombia or any other country of the region would have any interest in abandoning UNASUR in this moment. Because, like the Director of Political Affairs and Defense stated, the Bolivian diplomat Mauricio Dorfler, a country never knows when it will need UNASUR (Dorfler 2015).

In particular, the compromise of Santos government with the entity is protected by a sober and pragmatic vision about its role. In a general way, UNASUR is seen by Colombians as a propitious space to address international issues the member states may have, and, in particular, those of regional scope (Londoño 2015; Jaramillo 2015). In this perspective, UNASUR should be affirmed as a mechanism of intermediation and political solution of conflicts (Pastrana 2015), at the same time that it serves as a space to consolidate joint regional positions (Jara 2015). As seen, this approach points to an eminent political role of the organization.

In the specific case of Colombia, UNASUR has been projected as an institution of central importance in the so called post-conflict, that is, the period that will start with the signature and popular approval of the peace agreements in case the government current efforts are successful. Because like Londoño said, the agreements are not peace itself, although peace passes through the agreements (Londoño 2015). In the moment, the situation goes in the direction of a quick solution, because with the authorization of the Constitutional Court countersigned in July, the government intends to hold a plebiscite on peace still in September 2016.

UNASUR can work, altogether with United Nations (UN), as a guarantor of the process in many aspects. From the insurgent point of view, there is notorious insecurity in relation to the respect of democratic guarantees, that should enable their social reintegration and their political participation. It is important to remember that the country has nefarious precedents in this field. In the 1980s, la Uribe agreements signed with FARC have originated Patriotic Union, that quickly converted into the third national political force.
This rise triggered an extraordinary repressive wave: between 1988 and 1995, 6,177 political murders were accounted, besides 10,556 murders made for reasons assumed as political. The dead include almost every politician elected by UP between senators, deputies, mayors and councilors, besides two presidential candidates, Jaime Pardo Leal and Bernardo Jaramillo (Giraldo 1996).

On the other side, this theme is one of the aspects most criticized by people against the agreements, that consider that guerrillas criminals cannot remain unpunished. In this perspective, the agreements are interpreted as a left victory and a humiliation to the country.

There are peace opponents in both extremes, however with very different power of action. On the FARC side, there are signs that the head of organization has limited control over its own basis. This explain actions like the ambush that killed eleven soldiers in April 2015, threatening the continuity of the conversations in Havana: it is a sector of FARC contrary to the agreements. On the other hand, on early 2014, the magazine Semana published operation Andrômeda, revealing an illegal spying plan realized by the army, intercepting communications, inclusive from the government delegates in Havana. Thus, besides modifications on military command operated under Santos, the government counts with counterintelligence operation of this kind, that include services of a Britain agency, to keep the military in line (Betancourt Vélez 2015). Because if the insurgents remember the UP genocide, on the State side it is clear that the military blocked the peace negotiations under Bettancourt in the 1980s.

In the hypothesis that peace prevails, UNASUR can be the star of the show in diverse topics related to demobilization, like fiscalization and keeping of reclaimed arms; assuring that the demobilized do not be followed; and UNASUR should also have an important role in questions related to refugees and immigration (Rodrígues 2015). Because as a consequence of violence on field, it is estimated that the country produced about 5 million internal refugees and 9 million economic refugees, numbers that can only be compared to Congo. Between 1998 and 2008, approximately 760,000 families were ejected, leaving behind about 5.5 million hectares of land (Centro Nacional 2013).

Besides these questions, many analysts understand that, with the dismantling of the guerrilla, narcotraffic will rebound (Pastrana 2015; Londoño 2015). In some regions, particularly in the country’s South, the guerrilla has joined with narcotraffic in such a way that it is hard to trace a line that separate it from the bandas criminales (bacrim). Others point that the guerrilla has become a way of life for many young people and expect that there will be a migration towards the bacrim, like happened when paramilitary groups were demobilized under Uribe. In short, they understand that the main obstacle to
peace will no longer be political, but criminal.

From this point of view, an efficient confrontation of narcotraffic will demand regional collaboration. Accepting as a premise the failure of the militarist strategy based on repression and fumigation of cultives, in which Plan Colombia fits, there is the understanding that it will be necessary to modify the dominating approach to the narcotraffic problem. In this sense, UNASUR can offer an innovative reference, once it has already approved in 2015 a joint position, with the Colombian accession, pointing to an alternative focus. In opposition to the rationality of militarization of the drug combat, it defends an approach that separates traffickers from consumers, pointing to the decriminalization of the consumption, the reject on absolute prohibitionism and the priority to human rights (Nascone 2015). The legalization of production, selling and consumption of weed in Uruguay, the consumption of the coca leaf in Bolivia, the decriminalization of drug users in Ecuador and the regulation of the medicinal use of weed in Chile are some of the experiences that point to this direction. Simultaneously, agricultural policies to encourage farmers to alternative crops to coca will be necessary, what will be a particular challenge in the Colombian scenario, where the free trade agreements have exposed local agriculture to international competition, often subsidized (Pismel and Chagas 2014).

The convergence between the search for peace in Colombia and a lead role for UNASUR has been expressed in a significative way in interventions of its General-Secretary, Ernesto Samper. Besides his controversial presidency in the 1990s, that coincided with the boom of narcotraffic in the country, Samper has set himself up as an uncompromising supporter of the process. More than that, by defending a “holistic” approach of peace (Samper 2015), his position gets closer to left readings in which peace does not get confused with the absence of armed conflict, but is understood as a process that demands social, cultural and economic changes.

In short, Santos government counts with UNASUR to build peace, and UNASUR can find in the Colombian situation an opportunity to affirm its role.

Conclusion

Even though a superficial reading suggests that the creation of UNASUR was in tune with the counter hegemonic designs identified with the Venezuelan bolivarism, in opposition to the pro-US orientation prevalent in Colombia, our research qualifies this reading. By following the evolution of
the relation of these countries with UNASUR, in a period that coincided with PT administrations in Brazil, we observe that UNASUR constrained right extremism, identified with Uribe, and was also against left radicalism, exemplified by Chavism. The result of this analysis indicates a paradox, as the organization that symbolizes the legacy of the South American progressive wave nowadays reveals itself, important to the country that showed the most hostile to integration, in so far it seems of little efficiency to support the process that invested more in this direction. The option of Santos government for the political negotiation as a way to bring peace to the country showed an unheard valorization of UNASUR role, referred to as a necessary regional cooperation in a post-conflict scenario. Although it can not be said that the Colombian peace process is an agenda of the right – on the contrary, it is supported by the majority of the progressive forces of the country – there is little doubt that its implementation under a conservative government under every other aspect signals for a peace under a neoliberalism stance, and not for social change. Meanwhile, the deepening of the internal difficulties of Maduro government in Venezuela has corresponded to the feeling of growing regional isolation. In this country, UNASUR has showed little instrument, besides political mediation to mitigate difficulties faced by the Bolivarian process, where there are signs of a neoliberal restauration.

The moderated orientation of UNASUR reflected, in a certain way, the prevailing positions of the Brazilian diplomacy during PT administrations. However, in a moment when the so called progressive wave refloes in South America, the ambiguities of this bet for moderation are evident not only on the domestic plan, where a former ally came into the presidency in the midst of a spurious process, but also in the regional perspective, where UNASUR seems more useful to the government that aims a conservative change than to the one that would like to preserve change.

Some observed with bitterness that the impeachment process in Brazil was approved in parliament in April 17th of 2016, a date in which peasant movements celebrate as the day of the fight for land, in memory of the massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás. But few remembered that this is also the day that UNASUR was baptized, in the energy dome of the Margarita Island in Venezuela in 2007. In 2014, the date was consecrated as the day of the “Union of the South American Nations”. It remains to be seen what kind of union will be possible for the subcontinent and who will benefit from it from now on.
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INTERVIEWS


ABSTRACT
This article analyses the relation of Venezuela and Colombia with Unasur since its creation in 2008, with the purpose of exploring the reach and the limits intrinsic to a regional institution that incorporated countries with different governments in its original moment.

KEYWORDS
UNASUR; Venezuela; Colombia.