

Geopolitical Considerations of the NATO-Colombia Cooperation Agreement

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, FEB 28 2014

In June 2013, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Colombia signed a security cooperation agreement aimed at exchanging intelligence information in order to improve the capabilities on both sides of the Atlantic to face common threats, particularly transnational crime. This accord was sent to the Colombian Congress in September and, at the time of writing, is still awaiting ratification. It should be noted that this accord has weathered criticism, in particular from several Latin American leaders who regard it as a potential NATO “beachhead” into Latin America. The objective of this article is to place this agreement into the proper context of Latin American geopolitical and geosecurity affairs.

The Agreement

The Security of Information Agreement between Colombia and NATO was signed on June 25, 2013 between NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow and Colombia’s Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón Bueno. The goal is to strengthen security relations between the Alliance and the South American nation.

According to media reports, Bogotá will provide the Alliance with its experience in combating drug trafficking and international terrorism, while “Colombia will allegedly receive intelligence information from NATO, as well as gain access to best practices in relation to transparency, humanitarian operations, and strengthening the army.” In September 2013, the Colombian Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs sent a bill to the Colombian congress to ratify the Bogotá-NATO accord. The document highlights how “an objective of Colombia is to strengthen cooperation with multilateral organizations and nations [...] to guide the future vision of the Colombian armed forces.” Hence, closer relations with NATO are strongly encouraged.

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos welcomed the NATO agreement stating, “We have had a relationship with NATO for a long time and this will continue.” Deputy Secretary Vershbow has also expressed his support for the agreement, stating, “As an Alliance of democracies, we are gratified when countries sharing similar values reach out to us.” “Colombia’s expertise in enhancing integrity in the military is precisely the kind of substantive contribution that exemplifies the added value of cooperation,” Vershbow added. Similarly, a June 25, 2013, NATO media press release highlighted Colombia’s growing role in NATO initiatives, explaining how the South American nation participated in the 2013 NATO Conference on Building Integrity, which was held in Monterey, California.

Colombia is not the first non-European country with which NATO has established some kind of cooperation. Over the years, the Alliance has signed a variety of different types of accords and partnerships with nations across the globe – for example, recent accords have been signed with Australia, Japan and New Zealand.

This novelty is what makes the Colombian case significant. There have been several bilateral security accords between Latin American and European states, but this is the first time that NATO has signed a security-oriented accord with a Latin American nation. *Americas Quarterly* explains, “prior to [this] agreement, only two Latin American nations had formally partnered with NATO. Both Argentina and Chile participated in the Stabilization Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Argentina was also involved in the Kosovo Force peacekeeping mission.” It is debatable why it has

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taken NATO so long to build agreements with Latin American nations like it has with non-Western Hemisphere states. The growth of transnational threats that affect NATO's European members could warrant more of these initiatives with Latin American states in the near future (we will discuss the reasons for the Bogotá-NATO agreement below).

A June 2013 NATO press release explains, "the Security of Information Agreement does not formally recognise Colombia as a NATO partner but constitutes a first step for future cooperation in the security field." This is an important fact to keep in mind, as Colombia does not have a "partner" status with the Atlantic Alliance as compared to, for example, Australia. Similarly, this accord should not be taken as a first step towards a potential Colombian application to the Alliance. As several policymakers, such as Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzon, have repeatedly declared, Bogotá cannot apply for NATO membership due to geographical considerations. Moreover, Minister Pinzón has also stressed that the agreement does not allow for the deployment of foreign troops in Colombian territory. This is important to remember as the (unrealistic) possibility of such a development is a source of tension in the region.

Latin American Geopolitics in the 21st Century

As previously stated, the Colombia-NATO cooperation agreement focuses on sharing intelligence and military experiences to combat transnational crimes, and is not a step towards a hypothetical application by Bogotá to the Alliance. Nevertheless, these facts have not stopped detractors from expressing their concern and/or opposition to this agreement. We will first analyze the reasons why certain Latin American governments have declared their opposition to this accord, as well as ongoing military operations by NATO members (i.e. the U.S. and the UK) in Latin America. Finally, we will discuss whether the NATO-Colombia agreement will be beneficial to both parties.

1. Distrust for NATO

Even though it has been repeatedly stated that Colombia cannot become part of the Alliance and NATO troops will not be deployed to South American state, this agreement has a fair number of critics. Specifically, nations like Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela have made declarations that the Brussels-Bogotá accord will make Colombia a "NATO beachhead" within Latin America.

For example, President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela declared that this agreement represented a "threat to the continent." Similarly, Defense Minister Ruben Saavedra of Bolivia told the Bolivian newspaper *La Razón*, "Any presence of NATO in South America or Latin America poses a threat to peace in the region." Moreover, Defense Minister Maria Fernanda Espinosa of Ecuador explained, "Evidently, it raises concerns [...] We are going to start a dialogue [...] so we are better informed. We are an integrated, cooperative area in South America, and it is important that we discuss these things." Even Brazil's Defense Minister Celso Amorim expressed concern over the fact that Colombia, a member of the Union of South American Nations, now has a security agreement with an extra-continental military alliance.

Some explanation is necessary to understand why in Latin America, even U.S.-friendly nations remain ambivalent to military ties with nations of the Global North. One reason is that the history of colonialism and neocolonialism by both European powers and the U.S. in the Western Hemisphere still lingers in the minds of Latin American policy makers, military leaders, and society in general. In particular, U.S. military and espionage operations in Latin America throughout the Cold War (and occasionally in the post-Cold War era) have not helped to create a harmonious 21st century of Western Hemisphere relations. Recent accusations of U.S.-sponsored regime-change incidents in the Western Hemisphere include the 2002 (temporary) overthrow of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the 2004 coup against President Jean Bertrand Aristide of Haiti and the 2009 coup in Honduras that toppled President Manuel Zelaya from power.

Moreover, over the past decade, several Latin American leaders have come to power who have challenged Washington's historical influence in the Western Hemisphere. This is best exemplified by the rise of leaders such as the late Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, current President Nicolás Maduro, President Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael

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Correa of Ecuador. In recent years, these leaders have sought to reduce their nations' ties with the U.S. (and to a lesser extent, with Europe) and increase security relations with states such as Belarus, China, Iran and Russia. Furthermore, nations that have remained friendly towards NATO, such as Brazil (the ongoing fallout of the espionage program of the National Security Agency notwithstanding) have sought to decrease the influence of the U.S. in Latin America, arguably in order to increase Brazil's own influence as the region's powerhouse.

Hence, Colombian relations with NATO are viewed through the prism of skepticism and distrust, accompanied by fear that this could open the door for an unwanted presence by Alliance members in Latin America. A good example of certain governments working towards a decreased presence non-Latin American militaries based in the region occurred in 2009, when Ecuador's President Correa closed a U.S. military base in Manta, Ecuador. The U.S. continues to have a military presence in the region (i.e. bases in Honduras and El Salvador), and countries with anti-Washington governments like Bolivia, Ecuador or Venezuela do not want to see them expand.

Most importantly, it should be stressed that geography plays an important part of the distrust towards this accord. Opposing countries like Venezuela and Ecuador geographically border Colombia. From the point of view of Caracas and Quito, NATO's presence in Colombia could be regarded as a potential threat to their national security. This issue is stressed by occasional tensions between Colombia and its neighbors, such as 2008 incident over a Colombian military operation in Ecuador.

2. NATO Expands to Latin America

It is interesting to note how long it has taken NATO to increase its ties with Latin America. As Dr. Celia Szusterman, Director of the Institute for Statecraft's Latin America Programme, wrote in December 2012, "Latin America is currently outside NATO's area of interest." After the end of the Cold War, NATO was focused on its Eastern expansion while several of its members became involved in military operations in areas like Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Libya, and Mali (mostly as part of multinational coalitions).

Nevertheless, NATO states have maintained strong security-related ties with Latin American states. Due to space considerations we will not micro-analyze U.S. security relations with Latin America, but we can say that these include numerous military exercises and multinational operations to combat drug trafficking carried out, mostly, by U.S. Southern Command, as well as a plethora of weapons sales to U.S.-friendly regional states like Colombia and Mexico. However, it is important to highlight that other NATO nations also enjoy strong relations with the region. For example, the British Navy has been deployed to the Caribbean to combat drug trafficking along regional naval forces. This past October 2013, the frigate HMS Lancaster aided in a drug bust. More recently, the U.S. Coast Guard, with the British naval support ship Wave Knight providing backup, captured a speedboat in the Caribbean that hauled £8.5 million worth of cocaine in late February 2014.

Hence, an accord from NATO with a country in Latin America is the natural extension of increased Latin American relations with the European members of the Atlantic alliance. As Szusterman explains, "Whilst there is no question of NATO troops ever being involved in Latin America, this does not mean that there is no role for NATO to play in the region." With that said, it should not be forgotten that NATO initiatives in the Western Hemisphere are occurring at a snail's pace as compared to similar initiatives with other parts of the world.

3. Is the NATO-Colombia Accord necessary?

As a third and final point, it is necessary to place the objectives of the accord itself in a geosecurity context: is the accord necessary? As a Latin Americanist scholar, my opinion is: yes.

Intelligence sharing between Colombia and NATO will help this partnership grow to combat transnational crimes, such as drug trafficking, which originates in South America. Colombia, along with Peru and Bolivia, are the three biggest producers of cocaine in the world, and this narcotic is either transported through the Caribbean or Central America (i.e. via the infamous narco-submarines) to the U.S. market, or to West Africa (i.e. Guinea-Bissau, widely regarded as a narco-state), and from there to Europe. In Colombia, major trafficking entities are also threats to the

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government and society in general. These include the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), two narco-insurgent movements that have waged an internal war to overthrow the Colombian government for decades.

Additionally, a wide number of suspected criminals have been arrested far away from their homeland. For example, in April 2013, members of the Italian 'Ndrangheta mafia were arrested in Colombia. That same month, several Guinea-Bissau citizens (including the head of the navy) were arrested for allegedly being part of a drug smuggling ring between the West African nation and Colombia. Given these alliances among transnational criminal entities, it only stands to reason that governments, armed forces and law enforcement agencies should promote greater integration and cooperation amongst themselves to stand as a united front against these common transnational threats. In other words, this exchange of security information can only enhance Colombia's internal security and its efforts to combat drug trafficking, which is not just Bogotá's problem, but a global issue that affects both Europe and Colombia's neighbors.

Finally, not only is Colombia a source of transnational problems that affect NATO states but it also historically has had NATO/Washington-friendly governments and highly-trained armed forces. U.S. involvement in Colombia dates back to the 1980s when U.S. security agencies aided the Colombian government in hunting down major drug traffickers like the infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar, head of the Medellin Cartel. In the 1990s, this cooperation was transformed into the Plan Colombia, an aid program via which Washington provided Colombia with billions of dollars (as well as controversial military training) to combat drug trafficking and narco-insurgency. In other words, Colombia has had Washington-friendly civilian leaders as well as armed forces that have been trained by the U.S. military over the past decades. This makes Colombia the obvious first choice in Latin America for a security agreement with NATO.

Therefore, another way to look at the Colombia-NATO agreement would be: what took the Alliance so long to sign this kind of treaty with a Latin American state?

Conclusions

At the time of this writing, the Colombia-NATO agreement continues to await ratification by the Colombian Congress. The goal of the accord is to promote intelligence cooperation and military experience among the security agencies of this South American nation and the Atlantic Alliance. Moreover, this accord, while it is significant as it is the first of its kind with a Latin American nation, is not the first step towards a Colombian application for NATO membership. Nor have Bogotá and NATO established a partnership *a la* NATO-Australia. As the aforementioned June 2013 NATO press release explains "the Security of Information Agreement does not formally recognise Colombia as a NATO partner but constitutes a first step for future cooperation in the security field."

Nevertheless, several Latin American nations have declared themselves in opposition to the Security of Information Agreement, arguing that this could promote greater influence and interference by NATO in Latin American affairs. This concern mostly originates from nations that have governments which have an anti-Washington (or "anti-imperialist," to use their parlance) stance, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Moreover, even nations that have generally cordial relations with the U.S. and Europe, such as Brazil, have not supported the agreement between NATO and Colombia.

The fact that the Colombian Congress has yet to ratify the accord with NATO is interesting. It is debatable to what extent the concerns stemming from Caracas, Quito, La Paz or Brasilia are pressuring Colombian policymakers to reconsider the deal. But a more plausible reason is that the Colombian legislative, like the rest of the government, has other priorities nowadays, such as negotiations between Bogota and the FARC in Cuba, the country's upcoming elections in May and the fallout from a bizarre military espionage scandal. In an off-the-record discussion with the author of this analysis, a retired Colombian military officer argued that Colombia's slow bureaucracy is the prime reason why the agreement with NATO has not been ratified.

Ultimately, the NATO-Colombia security agreement should be analyzed by focusing on its objectives. Given that

Geopolitical Considerations of the NATO-Colombia Cooperation Agreement

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transnational criminal syndicates from Europe have a growing relationship with Colombian narco-criminal movements (i.e. the FARC), it is only natural that Colombia and NATO should promote a greater security-related relationship to combat these transnational security threats. It remains to be seen whether similar agreements between NATO and other Latin American states will happen in the near future.

About the author:

Alejandro Sanchez Nieto is a researcher who focuses on geopolitics, military and cyber security issues in the Western Hemisphere. He is a regular contributor for *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, the *Center for International Maritime Security*, *Blouin News*, and *Living in Peru*, among others. His analyses have appeared in numerous refereed journals including *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *Defence Studies*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *European Security*, *Perspectivas* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. His Twitter is @W_Alex_Sanchez.