

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Tension in the Andes

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Q1: How serious is the present deterioration of relations between Colombia and its neighbors Ecuador and Venezuela? Could it lead to an outbreak of conflict?

A1: Relations between Colombia and Ecuador have taken a serious downturn in the aftermath of Colombia's March 1 military operation against members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerilla organization in a remote area that involved a cross-border incursion into Ecuador. Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa responded by expelling Colombia's ambassador and breaking diplomatic relations with Colombia in protest and by dispatching troops to the border. Colombia replied by releasing documents captured from the FARC that it claims demonstrate ties between Correa and the Colombian guerrillas. Although both sides are still engaged in a sharp exchange of rhetoric, military confrontation is a most unlikely prospect and the bilateral relationship can be repaired, given the generally positive state that existed before the events of March 1. In the case of Venezuela, however, a return to anything resembling a normal bilateral relationship will be very difficult. That relationship had been deteriorating steadily in past months in large part due to ill-disguised friction between Presidents Alvaro Uribe and Hugo Chávez over the latter's involvement in high-profile efforts to broker the release of hostages kidnapped by the FARC and his expression of support for recognizing the belligerent status of that guerilla group. In response to the March 1 events, Chávez unleashed a torrent of insults at Uribe, broke relations with Colombia, and ordered several thousand troops to the Colombian border, which he closed on March 4. Uribe responded by claiming that captured FARC documents demonstrate collusion between Chávez and the FARC on a large scale. Armed conflict between Colombia and Venezuela is unlikely, however, as it would behoove neither side and is something that both Uribe and Chávez want to avoid.

Q2: What can be done to lower tensions and avoid further confrontation?

A2: The Organization of American States (OAS) has taken up the Ecuador-Colombia matter on an urgent basis. That is an important step. By moving the bilateral accusations and counteraccusations into the multilateral arena, both sides will be encouraged to scale back the rhetoric and begin to repair the damage to their relationship. The mechanisms of the OAS can also be employed to help encourage greater cooperation on security and law enforcement along the Colombia-Ecuador border. The Colombian-Venezuelan rift is a more difficult challenge because it is fueled by deep ideological and political differences between the leadership in the two countries, underscored by Colombia's long-standing conflict against a heavily armed and violent FARC insurgency that has visited so much suffering on Colombia's citizens and Chávez's benign view of that group. Colombia's claims of links between Chávez and the FARC, should they prove credible, would further deepen this divide and broaden its dimension. While Colombia and Venezuela have a mutually beneficial economic relationship, the underpinnings of bilateral cooperation have been severely weakened. Multilateral efforts from the OAS and the good offices of countries such as Brazil are useful in encouraging a return to a more normal bilateral relationship, but in the end, Colombia and Venezuela themselves need to reach basic consensus on issues that now deeply divide them, especially regarding the FARC insurgency.

Q3: What should the U.S. role be?

A3: The United States should encourage Ecuador and Colombia to work together to repair their relationship. It should also cooperate with the OAS and other countries in a multilateral approach to lower tension and improve cooperation in the region.

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