

Leaders of Venezuela and Colombia, Ideological Opposites, Are Tightening Ties

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BOGOTÁ, [Colombia](#) — The Bush administration has no closer friend in South America than President [Álvaro Uribe](#), an Oxford-educated lawyer raised in the privileged world of cattle estates and elite schools. [Hugo Chávez](#), the president of neighboring [Venezuela](#), was born into poverty and rose through the ranks of the army before emerging as the chief scourge of American policy in the region.

Such ideological opposites might be expected to focus on historical rivalries between their countries, which were at the edge of war as recently as the late 1980s. Instead, they are rapidly moving to strike energy deals, resolve a boundary dispute and increase trade, with Colombia's exports to Venezuela climbing to a record \$4 billion this year.

“This is the most favorable moment for relations between the two countries since they separated in 1830,” said Socorro Ramírez, a political scientist at the National University here and a specialist on Venezuela, referring to the origins of Colombia and Venezuela as one nation after their independence from Spain.

Obstacles to warmer ties persist, with senior officials often exchanging barbs. Their 1,400-mile border remains a haven for guerrillas, drug trafficking and other intrigue; two Colombian intelligence agents were recently killed on the Venezuelan side in an unsolved incident. New tolls at the Colombian border led to protests in Venezuela in October.

But Mr. Uribe has surprised Colombia's conservative establishment by embracing projects that have lifted Mr. Chávez's profile across the region. Most boldly, he welcomed Mr. Chávez's offer to help broker the release of dozens of captives held by Colombia's largest rebel group, including three American military contractors captured in 2003.

[At a summit meeting near Venezuela's border on Oct. 12 to inaugurate a pipeline taking Colombian natural gas to its neighbor, Mr. Uribe also offered to join the Bank of the South, a regional development bank championed by Venezuela as an alternative to Washington-based institutions like the [World Bank](#).]

American concerns over drug trafficking and energy security are in play in this new stage of Andean diplomacy. The United States remains the main consumer for both Colombia's cocaine and Venezuela's oil, but Washington's low prestige in much of the Andes has left Mr. Uribe, boxed in by pro-Chávez governments in Ecuador and Bolivia, with little choice but to strengthen bonds with Mr. Chávez.

Mr. Uribe is still subject to taunts from Mr. Chávez, who practices a confrontational style ingrained in Venezuela's political system, as when he urged the Colombian leader in

October to lend a guerrilla leader a plane to travel to Caracas for talks. The suggestion was met here with bland declarations of respect for Venezuela as a “brother country.”

“What exists in Venezuela, as well as Colombia, is political leadership that reflects the popular will, and we respect that,” said Fernando Araújo, Colombia’s foreign minister. [On Thursday, Mr. Araújo’s office disavowed comments in Washington by Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, who said he had little faith in Mr. Chávez’s efforts to mediate with the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC.]

Efforts here to engage Mr. Chávez stand in sharp contrast with those of the Bush administration, which has clashed with Venezuela over issues like Mr. Chávez’s growing arms purchases from Russia and his tightening political alliances with Cuba and Iran.

“Uribe surely has no illusions about Chávez’s regional ambitions, but he wisely keeps any provocative rhetoric in check,” said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue, a policy group in Washington focusing on Latin America. “Washington might draw some lessons from Uribe’s ability to deal with Chávez.”

Relations between the neighbors have evolved since reaching a critical point in 2005, when a diplomatic crisis erupted over Colombia’s abduction in Venezuela of Rodrigo Granda, a senior guerrilla leader with FARC, who had been living near Caracas. Mr. Uribe freed him in September in a gesture intended to move the hostage talks forward; Mr. Granda quickly decamped to Cuba.

Since 2005, Mr. Uribe and Mr. Chávez have steadily mended ties, driven largely by growing economic interdependence and Venezuela’s ambitions to lessen its reliance on the United States as the main market for its oil.

Venezuela, for instance, has South America’s largest natural gas reserves but still needs more from eastern Colombia to maintain oil production in the region around Lake Maracaibo. But Venezuela has said it would like to reverse the pipeline’s flow once its own reserves are tapped.

The two countries are also considering a pipeline to take Venezuelan crude oil to Colombia’s Pacific coast, a project that would reduce delivery time of exporting oil to China, a cornerstone of Mr. Chávez’s desire to diversify Venezuela’s energy exports.

Recent economic policies in Venezuela, meanwhile, have created bountiful opportunities for Colombia. For instance, Venezuelan farmers stymied by price controls have been unable to meet climbing domestic demand for food, with Colombian farmers rushing to meet Venezuela’s shortages of basic food items.

“How long will the honeymoon last?” Poder, a business magazine here, asked in a report in October marveling at Colombia’s new phase of relations with Venezuela. The country’s exports to Venezuela are surging almost 50 percent this year, with food gaining 31 percent in the first half of 2007 from last year, and automobile exports surging 59 percent.

The Uribe government has developed a nonconfrontational policy toward the Chávez administration; Mr. Chávez has a similar way of dealing with Mr. Uribe. He has avoided pressing him on claims of human rights abuses by death squads, an issue some legislators in Washington have used to delay a trade deal between the United States and Colombia.

Scholars liken the warming ties to precedents elsewhere in the region, like the thaw in the 80s between Argentina and Brazil, countries whose militaries were once oriented toward border threats but that are now too busy trading with each other to focus on disputes.

The similar governing styles of Mr. Uribe and Mr. Chávez may also have helped the leaders form a bond. Both leaders prioritize close contact with the poor, attack critics in the media and have lashed out at political opponents.

“Uribe is a populist of the right and Chávez is a populist of the left,” said Kenneth Maxwell, a professor of Latin American history at Harvard. “They see eye to eye.”