



Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela

Latin America Report N°97 | 1 December 2022

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. Tensions in the Neighbourhood.....	2
A. Chávez and Uribe at Loggerheads	2
B. Severed Relations.....	3
C. Petro and Chavismo.....	5
III. The Harmful Effects of Bilateral Breakdown.....	7
IV. Remaking Bonds.....	11
A. Consular, Commercial and Diplomatic Ties.....	11
B. Peace Talks.....	14
C. The Border	15
D. Washington, Latin America and the “Interim Presidency”	18
E. Regional and Multilateral Challenges	20
V. Recommendations.....	23
VI. Conclusion	26
APPENDICES	
A. Addressing Economic, Humanitarian and Security Concerns	27
B. About the International Crisis Group	29
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2019....	30
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	32

Principal Findings

What's new? With a new left-leaning administration in Bogotá, Colombia and Venezuela have resumed diplomatic relations after a three-year rupture marked by vitriol and scorn. The détente should generate significant benefits for citizens of both countries, but it will take time to rebuild trust and redress the sources of bilateral tensions.

Why does it matter? Millions of Venezuelans and Colombians have suffered from severed ties. Coordination in health, security, trade, consular and other matters is vital to protecting public well-being, especially of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Caracas will play a key role in peace negotiations between Bogotá and Colombia's rebel National Liberation Army.

What should be done? The two governments, with support from foreign partners, should rebuild cooperation mechanisms to help manage their overlapping and competing interests. Bogotá will need to tread carefully as it both works with Caracas to advance Colombia's security and economic priorities and urges Venezuela toward a negotiated settlement of its political crisis.

Executive Summary

Gustavo Petro's ascent to Colombia's highest office and swift restoration of ties with Venezuela are an opportunity to quell the diplomatic turbulence of recent years. Over the past decade, relations between the two states grew strained, then openly hostile; close to four years ago they were severed entirely. From 2019 throughout the remainder of former Colombian President Iván Duque's term, the two countries' leaders accused each other of interfering across their shared border to sow instability. Even so, the neighbours have remained profoundly interdependent, and millions of their inhabitants have been harmed by the diplomatic deep freeze. Now that Colombia has the political will to bring about a *détente*, the two countries can renew ties to mutual benefit. Petro has already asked Caracas to play a key role in hosting peace talks between Bogotá and the National Liberation Army (ELN), a Colombian rebel group. But rebuilding trust should not preclude Colombia's participation in efforts to press for a political settlement to end Venezuela's longstanding political dispute.

Disintegrating bilateral ties between Colombia and Venezuela have fuelled episodes of high tension and military brinkmanship. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro broke off diplomatic relations with Colombia early in 2019, after repeatedly closing the border, and has accused its government of hatching plots to overthrow or kill him. From the Colombian side, Duque, who left office in August 2022, helped orchestrate a "diplomatic siege" of his neighbour throughout his term, arguing that Venezuela was led by a criminal clique that belongs to "the chain of international terrorism". Both governments from time to time boosted their military presence at the border in response to perceived threats from the other side, largely said to involve armed groups serving as the state's proxies.

Despite the venom, the failure of both external and internal opponents to dislodge Maduro fed support in both countries for reconstruction of a relationship that remains indispensable to trade, security and the well-being of millions of citizens. Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, residents on both sides of the lengthy border, communities under the thumb of armed groups and numerous businesses depend for their livelihood and safety on working relations between the two capitals. Even during Duque's term, parliamentarians in both countries endeavoured to re-establish bilateral ties, while authorities in border provinces on both sides played a crucial role in enabling some formal crossings to reopen for pedestrians in late 2021. All the leading candidates in Colombia's May elections pledged to restore bilateral relations to one extent or another, while Petro, the eventual winner, made clear that he would do so "whatever the government" in Caracas.

The new president shows every sign of making good on his promise, with efforts to restore commercial, diplomatic and consular ties well under way. While slow going in many respects, these efforts are already bearing fruit. The pay-off from better relations is likely to be felt most immediately by businesses on both sides. Colombian officials believe that bilateral trade could soon reach \$1 billion per year provided that smuggling declines, although further growth will depend on better infrastructure and legal conditions that allow for enforcement of contracts. Efforts to support safe formal border crossings, stronger travel connections and improved access to identity docu-

ments through restored consular services should also enhance the safety, security and well-being of 2.5 million Venezuelans in Colombia, most of them surviving on the margins of the formal economy.

Even so, taxing challenges clutter the road ahead, notably in the field of security. The new Colombian government is intent on demobilising all armed groups as part of its bid for “total peace”, among them the ELN, which has extended its operations deep into Venezuelan territory with the reported complicity of local and national officials. Negotiations with the ELN, which restarted in mid-November, will depend to an extent on support from Venezuela’s government, which is a guarantor and host of the talks but may be reluctant to terminate its partnership with the rebels.

Improving security along the vast, unruly border will be another test of diplomatic mettle. After years of escalatory rhetoric, trust between the two nations’ militaries stands at a low ebb. Colombian armed forces remain anxious about reports of Venezuelan links to the Russian military, drug traffickers and armed groups that pose a threat to Bogotá. For its part, the Maduro government is likely to demand assurances that Colombian territory is no longer used as a launchpad for attempts to topple it before allowing better military cooperation. Armed groups operating in the borderlands may seek to undermine moves in that direction, along with vested interests inside the Venezuelan and Colombian state bureaucracies and security forces who believe they will lose out from closer ties.

A final source of friction could be efforts to achieve a negotiated political settlement in Venezuela. To the extent that Bogotá continues to play an active role in supporting these endeavours, including talks that restarted on 26 November in Mexico City, Petro could find himself facing a conundrum. On one hand, Colombia has much to gain from peaceful resolution of Venezuela’s prolonged political and socio-economic crises, which are the biggest source of humanitarian distress in Latin America and a continuous threat to regional stability. On the other, it may hesitate to press hard for a settlement in Venezuela if urging Maduro toward compromise could jeopardise progress on bilateral issues that lie at the heart of Petro’s policy ambitions.

It will be important for Petro to balance both imperatives. The need for a negotiated settlement in Venezuela is too urgent from the standpoint of security, humanitarian need and regional stability for Colombia to give the issue short shrift. Instead, to curb the risk of blowback from Caracas, Bogotá should work with regional partners to form a broad Latin American front in support of this objective, a move that could strengthen attempts to persuade the Maduro government to make concessions while lessening Colombia’s profile in this effort. While there is no guarantee that this gambit will work, it is the best way to navigate a sensitive moment in bilateral and regional diplomacy.

The emerging era of cordial relations promises concrete benefits to both nations, but it also represents a crucial test of new approaches in the region aimed at cooperating with rather than blacklisting the Venezuelan government. With help from its neighbours, Bogotá should look to end not just Caracas’ isolation but also the broader crisis that has caused so much tumult and hardship in Venezuela and beyond.

Bogotá/Caracas/Washington/Brussels, 1 December 2022

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela

I. Introduction

Briefly part of one country after vanquishing Spanish colonial rule, Colombia and Venezuela have endured frequent bouts of discord. The disintegration in 1830 of Gran Colombia, which also included present-day Ecuador and Panama, was mainly a result of struggles between emerging national elites spread out across a vast and often impenetrable land mass. But despite the eventual demarcation of national frontiers, people living in the borderlands continued to share kinship ties, a common culture and close trading relations. The onset of the 21st century, however, saw elected governments in the two countries pursuing radically divergent ideological turns, leading over the past twenty years to tirades from their respective leaders, border closures and the eventual rupture of diplomatic relations.¹

This report explores the fallout from the severing of ties between Colombia and Venezuela since early 2019 and, with the June election of Gustavo Petro to Colombia's presidency, the push to restore cordial relations between the two neighbours. It will consider the opportunities and challenges that thawing relations will create in cross-border commerce, migration and security cooperation; peace talks between Bogotá and the National Liberation Army (ELN); and efforts to resolve Venezuela's long-running political crisis through a negotiated settlement. It draws on over 70 interviews, including some conducted at a two-day workshop involving Venezuelan legislators, figures close to the Maduro government, Venezuelan opposition figures and civil society activists from both countries. Crisis Group also consulted high-level officials in the Petro administration, Colombian diplomats and military officers, and experts from both countries, while drawing extensively on its previous work on the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands and the tensions that have plagued them.²

¹ Occasional convulsions have been a recurring feature in the bilateral relationship. During the 19th century, there was no agreement to delimit parts of the border, especially in the Guajira peninsula. In the 20th century, disputes centred on the rights to waters in the Gulf of Venezuela. The most charged episode came in August 1987, when the Colombian corvette *ARC Caldas* entered contested waters and the Venezuelan government ordered its air force to deploy. The incident was resolved diplomatically, but the underlying territorial and maritime disputes are not yet settled. Luis Daniel Álvarez Vanegas, "Una retrospectiva histórica sobre las relaciones entre Colombia y Venezuela", *Venezuela y Colombia: una relación de encuentros y desencuentros* (Caracas, 2020). See also Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°84, *Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela*, 14 December 2020; and N°65, *Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, 21 March 2018.

² See Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°95, *Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, 27 September 2022; N°94, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia*, 9 August 2022; N°93, *Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela*, 17 February 2022; and N°68, *The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guer-*

II. Tensions in the Neighbourhood

A. Chávez and Uribe at Loggerheads

Before Hugo Chávez became Venezuelan president in 1999, spillage of Colombia's internal armed conflict across the border tended to strengthen cooperation between Bogotá and Caracas rather than undermine it. Chávez himself looked to emulate Colombian leaders in certain respects on his road to the presidency. His first trip abroad after being released from prison following his 1992 coup attempt was to Bogotá, where he was interested in learning more about Colombia's constituent assembly, which had worked to overcome the country's chronic violence and its political system's declining legitimacy.³ An adviser to Gustavo Petro, at the time an outgoing member of the Colombian Congress, invited him. Even so, under *chavismo*, the movement and ideology that Chávez founded, political and diplomatic differences between a succession of Colombian governments and Caracas widened.⁴

Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's right-leaning president from 2002 to 2010, at first enjoyed a cordial relationship with Chávez. Trade between the countries blossomed, exceeding \$7 billion in 2008.⁵ But tensions between the two charismatic leaders heightened as a result of Chávez's perceived affinities with the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).⁶ In September 2007, Uribe appointed Chávez and a Colombian senator, Piedad Córdoba, as mediators in a bid to seek a humanitarian agreement with the FARC for the release of hostages. Less than two months later, Uribe terminated the effort, to which Chávez responded by threatening to "freeze" bilateral relations and accusing his Colombian counterpart of conspiring

rillas, 12 July 2018; as well as *Disorder on the Border*; and *Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, both op. cit.; Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°24, *Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19*, 15 April 2020; Crisis Group Commentary, "Venezuela: The Twilight of Maximum Pressure", 10 October 2022; Phil Gunson, "A Twist in Caracas: Is a Venezuela-U.S. Reboot on the Cards?", Crisis Group Commentary, 16 March 2022; Bram Ebus, "A Rebel Playing Field: Colombian Guerrillas on the Venezuelan Border", Crisis Group Commentary, 28 April 2021; Bram Ebus, "Under a Merciless Sun: Venezuelans Stranded Across the Colombian Border", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 February 2020; Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia's Uneasy Peace and Troubled Borders", 25 October 2018; and, lastly, Crisis Group Statement, "The Risks of Diplomatic Rupture with Maduro's Venezuela", 18 December 2018.

³ The Colombian constituent process that began in 1991 was prompted by extreme political and criminal violence. Part of the solution was to address the traditional political parties' lack of legitimacy, an issue that was also central to Chávez's 1998 electoral campaign. Colombia's constituent process also made it possible for the guerrilla group M-19 (of which Petro was a member) to hand over its arms and join the country's democratic system. "Elementos del proceso constituyente colombiano", The Library of the Chilean National Congress, May 2020; José Cuesta Novoa, "Cuando Chávez vino por primera vez a Colombia", *El Espectador*, 7 March 2013.

⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Colombian academic, 3 May 2022.

⁵ Official Colombia data shows that in 2021 trade between both countries stood at \$393.7 million. In 2008, it was \$7.21 billion. "Exportadores insisten al Gobierno en retomar el comercio binacional con Colombia", *Tal Cual*, 12 August 2022.

⁶ The Colombian government's decision to grant asylum to Pedro Carmona was another bone of contention. Carmona led a coup attempt against Chávez in April 2002 and was briefly acting president. "Colombia concedió el asilo a Carmona", *El Tiempo*, 27 May 2002.

against his government. Diplomatic relations between the two countries proceeded to worsen sharply until Uribe left power.⁷

B. *Severed Relations*

Despite lessening during former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos' first term, friction between the two countries rose from 2015 onward, peaking in late February 2019, when Chavez's successor President Nicolás Maduro cut all diplomatic and consular relations with Colombia.⁸ The move came weeks after Juan Guaidó, chair of the opposition-held National Assembly at the time, asserted his claim to the "interim presidency" on the grounds that Maduro's re-election the year before had been rigged.⁹ Guaidó's claim to the presidency received the support of over 50 countries, including the U.S. under then-President Donald Trump, Colombia, and numerous European and other Latin American states, and prompted febrile speculation that the fall of the government in Caracas was imminent.¹⁰

Venezuela's main opposition forces, meanwhile, sought to spur Maduro's rapid departure by forcing a split in the armed forces.¹¹ Encouraging just such a rift was the opposition's rough objective when, in February 2019, it sought to send convoys carrying food and health supplies across the Colombian and Brazilian borders into Venezuelan territory, a plan supported by the governments of Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and the U.S., as well as the secretary-general of the Organization of American States.¹² After this effort failed, and until his term ended in August 2022, Colombia's President Duque championed a regional campaign to isolate the Venezuelan government, arguing that "the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro is in collusion with drug trafficking and terrorism".¹³

Even before the two states broke ties, leaders on both sides were blaming the other for stirring up unrest, on occasion using these accusations to divert attention from

⁷ In March 2008, the Colombian armed forces carried out an aerial raid in Ecuadorian territory and killed Raúl Reyes, then the second most prominent figure in the FARC. In protest, Chávez withdrew Venezuelan diplomatic personnel from Colombia, expelled the Colombian ambassador in Caracas and deployed the army along the border. In July 2010, Venezuela broke off diplomatic relations with Colombia after the Uribe government during an Organization of American States meeting accused Caracas of harbouring members of the FARC and ELN, which Chávez denied. "Cronología de los rifirrafes de la relación de Uribe y Chávez", *Semana*, 10 July 2008.

⁸ For a full account, see Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit. See also "Venezuela's Maduro cuts ties with Colombia amid border conflict", NBC News, 24 February 2019; and "Colombia and Venezuela poised for a reset of relations under Gustavo Petro", *Financial Times*, 18 July 2022.

⁹ Although polls in Venezuela have often been marred by campaign rule violations, conditions in the 2018 presidential election represented a low point. Both the main opposition parties and most of the opposition's leaders were prohibited from running, while turnout stood at a record low. Phil Gunson, "President Maduro's Likely Re-election in Breadline Venezuela", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 May 2018.

¹⁰ "Colombia's Duque says Venezuelan Maduro's hours are numbered", Reuters, 1 February 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan opposition politician, 29 September 2022.

¹² "As Venezuela aid standoff turns deadly, Maduro severs ties with Colombia", *The New York Times*, 23 February 2019.

¹³ "Palabras del Presidente Iván Duque en la instalación de la XIX Reunión de Ministros de Relaciones Exteriores del Grupo de Lima", Colombian Presidency, 14 August 2020.

domestic woes.¹⁴ Maduro and close allies condemned top Colombian officials for allegedly planning his assassination in 2018 and seeking to destabilise and impoverish the country.¹⁵ Colombian governments, such as the one led by Uribe, long argued that Venezuela posed a threat to Colombian and regional security, defending these claims by pointing to reported ties between Caracas and Colombian armed groups.

The mutual accusations intensified under the Maduro and Duque governments, with the latter denouncing the Venezuelan state's alleged involvement in drug trafficking as well as its collaboration with the Iranian and Russian governments.¹⁶ The May 2020 launch from Colombian territory of a hapless mercenary invasion known as Operation Gideon, aimed at overthrowing Maduro's government, was denounced by Venezuela as a plot devised by leaders in Bogotá.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Colombia's former vice president, Marta Lucía Ramírez, accused the Maduro government of infiltrating mass protests in Colombia in 2019 in the hope of whipping up discontent, charges that she repeated when demonstrations resurged against Duque's government in May 2021.¹⁸

The depth of mistrust between the two countries excluded all but the most rudimentary cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both governments agreed to exchange epidemiological information, using as a bridge the Pan American Health Organization, but there was no sustained cross-border effort to address the pandem-

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan government supporter, Madrid, 4 April 2022.

¹⁵ In August 2018, Maduro accused Colombia of sponsoring an assassination attempt featuring an explosive drone. "Maduro denuncia 'un intento de asesinato' con drones explosivos y culpa al presidente Santos", *El Mundo*, 5 August 2018. In 2020, Maduro accused the Duque government of supporting the establishment of camps in Colombia to be used as bases for mercenary incursions into Venezuelan territory. "Maduro acusa a Duque de supervisar mercenarios que atacarán Venezuela", *El Tiempo*, 4 June 2020. In December 2020, Maduro pointed the finger at Duque and the Colombian government for allegedly planning his assassination on the day of parliamentary elections in Venezuela. "Maduro acusa a Duque de planificar su asesinato durante las elecciones", RCN Radio, 8 December 2020. The accusations have also touched on alleged economic and infrastructure sabotage. In 2018, the Venezuelan government said smuggling to Colombia was responsible for scarcities of goods and a lack of foreign currency. "Maduro asegura que contrabando es responsable de falta de dinero", *Deutsche Welle*, 1 August 2018. In May 2022, Maduro accused Duque of organising attacks on the Venezuelan electrical system and oil refineries. "Maduro acusa a Duque de ataques a refineries y sistema eléctrico", *Runrunes*, 24 May 2022.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Colombian intelligence officers, Bogotá, 25 October 2018. "Vicepresidenta Colombia dice que Venezuela es amenaza para seguridad regional", *La Vanguardia*, 10 January 2019; "Colombia: incursión militar en apoyo a Maduro es 'una amenaza a la paz en la región'", *Deutsche Welle*, 2 April 2019.

¹⁷ The Venezuelan government foiled the poorly executed plot. Maduro claimed that Duque had "supervised camps in Medellín, Antioquia and Norte de Santander" where the mercenaries were allegedly trained. "Maduro acusa a Duque de supervisar campamentos de mercenarios paramilitares", *Nodal*, 4 June 2020. On the operation, see Linda Pressly, "'Bay of Piglets': A 'bizarre' plot to capture a president", *BBC*, 30 July 2020; "An incursion into Venezuela, straight out of Hollywood", *The New York Times*, 19 August 2020; and Joshua Goodman, "3 Venezuelans plead guilty for aiding anti-Maduro plot", *AP*, 5 March 2021.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian military officer, Bogotá, 6 July 2021. "Los disturbios en las protestas desatan brotes xenófobos en Colombia", *El País*, 28 November 2019; "Vicepresidenta de Colombia denuncia injerencia de Nicolás Maduro en el paro nacional colombiano", *Infobae*, 6 May 2021; "Gobierno de Venezuela niega estar envuelto en las protestas sociales que inundan a Colombia", *Anadolu Agency*, 6 May 2021.

ic's consequences.¹⁹ During the initial lockdown, Venezuelan migrants returning to their country encountered serious obstacles when travelling toward and across the border. Partly in response to the lack of coordinated humanitarian assistance, the local governments in the border states of Norte de Santander and Táchira began cooperating on issues such as the transport of children living in Venezuela but studying in Colombia, managing to ease the restrictions on crossing the border.²⁰

C. *Petro and Chavismo*

Despite a shared left-wing political outlook and a personal rapport, the friendship between Petro and Chávez began to wane well before the latter's death (the last time they met was reportedly in 2006), and the relationship between the new Colombian president and *chavismo* in general has not been warm. Petro criticised Chávez's accusations in January 2008 that the Colombian government was fuelling a war under pressure from the U.S., saying his "efforts were hurting, not helping, prospects for peace in Colombia".²¹ These public reproaches damaged relations with the Venezuelan president, while also sowing distrust of Petro within *chavismo*.²² Before assuming the presidency, Petro was outspoken in his criticism of the Maduro government's economic policies and increasingly authoritarian style, stating that "there is no revolution" in a government that clings to power "to capture oil rents".²³ He also said *chavismo* "does not like discussions; they do not like when people have different opinions".²⁴

Although Petro has restored formal relations with Caracas, neither side has entirely forgotten the old grudges.²⁵ Within *chavismo*, Petro continues to be seen and treated warily. He is recognised as a former friend of Chávez, but also considered a "traitor" for his public attacks on the late president and Maduro. One *chavista* observed that senior officials see him as a "dangerous political adversary who raises questions from the left".²⁶ On the Colombian side, a number of senior government figures continue

¹⁹ "A través de OPS, Colombia intercambia información sanitaria con Venezuela", Colombian Ministry for Health and Social Protection, 17 March 2020. Crisis Group Briefing, *Broken Ties, Frozen Borders*, op. cit.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Colombian regional official, Brussels, 13 May 2022. "Los caminantes venezolanos vuelven a migrar", *El País*, 18 October 2020; "Colombia-Venezuela: a falta de gobiernos responden las personas", *Razón Pública*, 10 October 2021.

²¹ "GOC Reacts to Chavez Aggression towards Colombia", Public Library of U.S. Diplomacy, 17 January 2008.

²² Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan government supporter, Madrid, 4 April 2022.

²³ President Maduro has reacted furiously to criticism by other left-wing leaders, saying: "Every day there is a campaign against Venezuela. A cowardly left has emerged out there that bases its discourse on attacking the successful, victorious Bolivarian model, attacking its historical legacy and attacking me as president". "Nicolás Maduro dispara contra la "izquierda cobarde, fracasada y antibolivariana", *El Mostrador*, 10 February 2022; "Gustavo Petro: 'Maduro se ha equivocado y Venezuela ha tenido un proceso dictatorial'", *La Tercera*, 13 June 2018; "Gustavo Petro dice que no le interesa el apoyo de Maduro", RCN Radio, 15 November 2018.

²⁴ "Dura arremetida de Petro al gobierno de Nicolás Maduro", *El Tiempo*, 31 January 2020.

²⁵ José Luis Carillo, "Con Gustavo Petro, Nicolás Maduro ganó un nuevo aliado, pero no será incondicional", *Tal Cual*, 26 June 2022.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan government supporter, Madrid, 4 April 2022.

to regard Maduro with distrust and are gravely concerned by evidence of his officials' involvement in systematic human right violations.²⁷

Against this backdrop, it was not until early November that Petro and Maduro finally met in Caracas.²⁸ Colombian diplomats had expected that the Venezuelan government would use the event to announce the country's reincorporation into the inter-American system for the protection of human rights, following earlier discussions about the issue, including direct conversations with Maduro. At the end of the meeting, however, Maduro promised only to assess rejoining the system, while a joint declaration heralded in largely generic terms a new era of cooperation.²⁹

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bogotá, 30 September 2022; "Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela", A/HRC/51/43, UN Human Rights Council, 20 September 2022.

²⁸ "Engaging or enabling an autocrat? Colombian leader visits Venezuela", *The New York Times*, 1 November 2022.

²⁹ "Petro lidera el regreso de Venezuela a los organismos regionales", *El País*, 1 November 2022. Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bogotá, 4 November 2022. For the joint declaration's full text, see tweet by Petro Gustavo, president of Colombia, @petrogustavo, 10:16pm, 1 November 2022.

III. The Harmful Effects of Bilateral Breakdown

The rift between Colombia and Venezuela has greatly complicated the lives of those who in one way or another depend on smooth, functioning relations between the two. Foremost among them are the over seven million inhabitants of the two countries' frontier states.³⁰ Armed groups in the borderlands have taken advantage of the lapse in cross-border cooperation to expand their reach, profiting from control of burgeoning illicit businesses, such as drug production, trafficking of various goods and illegal frontier crossings, in which they charge for the right of passage.³¹ They have also exploited the lack of communication between the two security forces and, allegedly, benefited from collusion with certain state officials.³² Eyewitness testimonies confirm that members of the Venezuelan security forces have colluded with the ELN, allowing the rebels to enforce control of border communities, train violent para-police groups loyal to *chavista* politicians, claim stakes in illegal gold mining and engage in other illicit activities, such as kidnapping.³³

Clashes between rival armed groups have escalated as they fight for crossings, territory and criminal rents. Fighting broke out early in 2022 between the ELN and splinter groups from the former FARC – widely referred to as FARC “dissidents” – on both sides of the border that separates the states of Arauca (Colombia) and Apure (Venezuela). It led to the forced displacement of thousands.³⁴ The Colombian side of the border is also plagued by frequent assassinations of civil society figures, also known as “social leaders”.³⁵

Pointed accusations by each government regarding the other side's alleged support for armed groups fuelled tensions between the capitals and contributed to what a Venezuelan government insider described as a “potential conflict zone” along the border.³⁶ The previous Colombian government frequently claimed that Venezuela had behaved permissively toward armed groups operating in its territory; it presented its charges before the UN General Assembly in 2019, where former President Duque said his government had “irrefutable and convincing evidence that corroborates the dictatorship's support for criminal and narco-terrorist groups that operate in Vene-

³⁰ An estimated 4.46 million people live in Colombia's six border departments, while 3.2 million are believed to live in Venezuela's four border states.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bogotá, 29 June 2022.

³² Ebus, “A Rebel Playing Field”, op. cit.; Annette Idler, *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War* (Oxford, 2019).

³³ Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°78, *A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups*, 20 February 2020; and N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019; as well as *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.

³⁴ “Colombia/Venezuela: Border Area Abuses by Armed Groups”, Human Rights Watch, 28 March 2022. These skirmishes followed the Venezuelan military's launch of a large-scale operation against a dissident faction of the FARC in Apure state, displacing over 6,000 people. See Ebus, “A Rebel Playing Field”, op. cit.

³⁵ Valentina Parada Lugo, “La zozobra que viven líderes sociales en Arauca luego de detenciones arbitrarias”, *El Espectador*, 11 January 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan government insider, 4 April 2022.

zuela to attack Colombia”.³⁷ The Venezuelan opposition used these claims to press demands that South American states trigger the 1947 Rio Treaty’s mutual defence provisions, in an effort to create a legal justification for foreign military intervention to oust Maduro.³⁸

Some Colombian officials believe that secretive understandings between certain armed groups and state officials in Venezuela may have underpinned attacks by the former targeted at Colombian military or state officials, causing peaks of tension between the two nations.³⁹ For instance, shots fired at the helicopter carrying former President Duque close to the border city of Cúcuta in June 2021 were blamed by Colombian authorities on FARC dissidents in combination with an ELN faction, which had supposedly planned the escape of those involved to Venezuelan territory.⁴⁰

For its part, the Venezuelan government has claimed, without showing specific evidence, that “terrorist, armed and drug trafficking groups from Colombia have been infiltrating Venezuelan territory (...) to decimate internal security, to attack the people, to traffic Colombian cocaine and to prepare for attacks on military, police and political targets”.⁴¹ Venezuelan government insiders say the authorities have turned to the ELN as a means of policing the loyalty of border communities, due to fears of armed incursions from Colombia.⁴²

Meanwhile, the killings of several prominent FARC dissident leaders on Venezuelan soil have given rise to suspicions that mercenaries linked to the Colombian government have been involved in clandestine cross-border operations against dissident factions.⁴³ That the pace of these operations accelerated before the Colombian presidential election may suggest that operators were moving quickly to pack in as much

³⁷ In the end, representatives from sixteen countries, including Colombia and the U.S., agreed to impose travel restrictions on 29 Maduro government officials under the Rio Treaty, as the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance is known. “Iván Duque denuncia en la ONU al gobierno venezolano por ‘narcoterrorista’”, *La Vanguardia*, 25 September 2019.

³⁸ “Rio Treaty nations move to further isolate Venezuela”, VOA, 4 December 2019.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, 6 July 2021. “Colombia acusa a Venezuela de estar detrás del ataque contra el helicóptero en el que viajaba Duque”, *Notimérica*, 22 July 2021; “Nicolás Maduro acusa a Iván Duque de gestar nuevo plan contra Venezuela”, *Deutsche Welle*, 10 March 2021.

⁴⁰ “Identifican a presuntos responsables del atentado al helicóptero del presidente Iván Duque”, *Semana*, 7 July 2021.

⁴¹ “Maduro acusa a Colombia de infiltrar ‘grupos terroristas’ en Venezuela”, *Deutsche Welle*, 1 October 2021.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, ruling party member, Caracas, February 2022.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, security sources, November 2021. Venezuelan officials have also accused Colombia of killing Venezuelan troops in the border area, as well as fuelling instability and drug trafficking into Venezuela. “Diosdado Cabello acusa a Colombia por muertes de militares venezolanos”, *El Tiempo*, 22 September 2020. From 2019, the Venezuelan military undertook continuous military exercises along the border with Colombia, deploying thousands of troops and testing long-range missiles. “Ejercicios militares en el patio vecino”, *Cambio Colombia*, 8 July 2022; “En breve Maduro le mostrará su poder militar a una Colombia que no se inquieta”, *Al Navío*, 1 November 2021; “Maduro anunció ejercicios militares para defenderse de EE.UU y Colombia”, *Télam Digital*, 9 January 2020; “Venezuela inicia ejercicios militares para ‘defender las ciudades’”, *Deutsche Welle*, 16 February 2020.

activity as they could prior to the new administration taking power, because of an understanding that it would not give them a green light to continue.⁴⁴

The lack of communication between the two countries' armed forces, which has impeded even informal messaging between local commanders, has meant that in cases where coordination on cross-border operations might have been feasible, it did not happen. Early in 2022, for instance, Venezuelan troops carried out operations against FARC dissidents in Venezuelan territory, causing many to flee across the border. Colombian military sources noted that Colombian units would have been able to contain these movements had they been warned in advance, which would have made sense for both governments, given that both consider most dissident groups a security threat.⁴⁵

Economic conditions along the border have also suffered badly as a result of the frontier's frequent closures, Venezuela's protracted slump and general mistrust between the nations. Once buoyant formal trade between the two countries has undergone a vertiginous decline. Exports from Colombia to Venezuela stood at \$331 million in 2021, a fall of over 95 per cent from its 2008 high.⁴⁶ Informal economic activity predominates along the Colombian side of the border, particularly in the urban hub of Cúcuta, while on the Venezuelan side business activity has contracted sharply in Ureña and San Antonio. Decrepit roads and public services as well as a lack of banking facilities are major blocks on business activity on the Venezuelan side, as the governor of Táchira state, Freddy Bernal, has acknowledged.⁴⁷ Large-scale smuggling of food, gasoline and other raw materials, such as minerals, from Venezuela has enhanced the profits of armed and criminal groups.⁴⁸

Venezuela's overlapping crises have also driven the exodus of millions of people, many of whom have sought to settle in Colombia, where the breakdown in bilateral relations compounds their ordeal. According to the UN, as of September, more than 7.1 million Venezuelans had left the country since roughly 2014, with 2.5 million living in Colombia.⁴⁹ Once there, many migrants and refugees live in poverty and insecurity.⁵⁰ For Venezuelans in Colombia, official processes have been fraught with obstacles precisely because of the absence of consular services. Procedures such as renewing passports, obtaining legalised and apostilled documents, or registering the birth of a child were impossible to carry out from Colombia. In turn, the lack of doc-

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, security sources, March 2022; Crisis Group telephone interview, Colombian journalist, 16 August 2022.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Colombian military officers, Arauca and Bogotá, March, April and July 2022.

⁴⁶ "Diálogos con Venezuela mejorarían el comercio anual de Colombia por 331 millones de dólares", *Vanguardia*, 23 June 2022; "Este es el panorama de la relación comercial que sostiene Colombia con Venezuela", *La República*, 14 May 2022.

⁴⁷ "La activación comercial en la frontera será gradual y favorecerá a Colombia", *El Estímulo*, 5 August 2022.

⁴⁸ Juan Camilo Jaramillo, "The scale of illegal coltan trafficking in Colombia and Venezuela", *In-Sight Crime*, 18 August 2021.

⁴⁹ "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela", Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V), 5 July 2022.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven*, op. cit.

uments has been a barrier to enjoying certain rights in Colombia, where sometimes a passport is required for health services beyond emergency care.⁵¹

The exodus is still under way. According to the UN, each day approximately 400 refugees and migrants walk the routes from the border to Bogotá or other Colombian cities, including children between the ages of ten and fifteen who are unaccompanied and run the risk of becoming victims of human trafficking or being recruited by armed groups. As a result of border closures or their lack of identity documents, many Venezuelans have had to cross into Colombia through informal paths or *trochas* that are controlled by gangs or armed groups, which usually charge a fee for passage. Large numbers of Venezuelans have also headed northward to the U.S., via the extremely perilous unpaved jungle route from Colombia to Panama through the Darién Gap.⁵²

Migration is not a one-way street, however, and some migrants have decided to return to Venezuela. Many of these report that returning home was arduous, and that they experienced tough conditions once back in their homeland.⁵³ The Venezuelan government launched a campaign to help migrants in need of assistance who wished to return to Venezuela, but a number of them complained that they had to pay large fees for repatriation flights.⁵⁴ Many of those who decided to return from Colombia during the pandemic's early stages, due to the difficulty of earning a living amid the lockdown, were obliged to walk hundreds of kilometres to the border. Upon crossing into Venezuela, they were received in overcrowded quarantine centres where conditions were dire and para-police groups loyal to *chavismo* were constantly looking for signs of political dissent.⁵⁵

⁵¹ It should be noted that obtaining a passport has become exceptionally difficult in Venezuela as well, due to administrative failings. "Las seis barreras más grandes de los venezolanos en el país", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 27 October 2020; "Desprotegidos: Impacto de la ausencia de servicios consulares en los derechos de la población venezolana en el exterior", Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 31 March 2021.

⁵² In 2021, over 1,500 Venezuelans crossed the Gap. But between January and September 2022, at least 107,692 Venezuelans took the route, according to Panamanian authorities. In 2022 so far, at least eighteen Venezuelans have been reported dead while making the crossing, but there is no official figure because many bodies are abandoned or unidentified. "Más de 107.000 migrantes venezolanos han cruzado la selva del Darién en lo que va de 2022", *El Diario*, 11 October 2022; "Al menos 18 venezolanos han muerto en la selva del Darién durante 2022", *El Pitazo*, 22 September 2022.

⁵³ According to Colombian authorities, between March and August 2020 more than 95,000 Venezuelans voluntarily returned to Venezuela. Nicolás Lozano and Diana Mora, "Crisis humanitaria en la frontera: un retrato del abandono", Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 15 October 2020; Crisis Group Report, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant, 29 June 2022.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven*, op. cit.

IV. Remaking Bonds

Presidents Petro and Maduro rapidly renewed diplomatic ties after the former assumed power in August, and they pushed for deeper cooperation on critical bilateral issues. But beyond these gestures and rebuilt lines of communication – both important in their own right – there is still a long way to go in handling the prickly issues that concern the two neighbours to both sides' satisfaction.

A. Consular, Commercial and Diplomatic Ties

Top Colombian and Venezuelan officials have proclaimed the re-establishment of consular, commercial and diplomatic relations in the past few months. These moves were no longer controversial by the time they were made. All the main presidential candidates in the Colombian polls agreed with at least some of these steps. Even former President Duque had declared, in October 2021, that his government was willing to reopen consular services in Venezuela (but not reforge diplomatic ties), while the parliaments of both countries had pushed unsuccessfully to restore relations.⁵⁶ The Venezuelan government, for its part, has been proposing to re-establish relations since 2020.⁵⁷

Restored consular missions should eventually be in a position to assist nationals in both countries by issuing vital identification and travel documents. They should also be able to support expanding business and investment ties. The rupture of the last few years has nevertheless bequeathed to officials a number of logistical headaches. Colombian authorities will have to budget an estimated \$6 million to re-establish a consular network in Venezuela after losing leases on fourteen of the country's fifteen consulates as well as the personal details of Colombian residents in Venezuela.⁵⁸ The Colombian government has already started the process of reopening consulates, and is also designating officials to assume charge of diplomatic and consular affairs.⁵⁹ A priority for restored consular representation will be to assist Colombian nationals imprisoned in Venezuela, since many require protection in jails long blighted by violence.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Duque nevertheless said he would do so “on the premise that there are guarantees in terms of security” for Colombian officials assigned to Venezuela. “Propuestas de los candidatos sobre manejo de relaciones diplomáticas con Venezuela”, *La República*, 14 April 2022; “Duque dice que abrirá consulados en Venezuela si hay ‘seguridad’”, *Diario Las Américas*, 5 October 2021. On the efforts by the two legislatures, see “Los Congresos de Colombia y Venezuela se topan con el rechazo de Duque a retomar las relaciones bilaterales”, *El País*, 21 October 2021.

⁵⁷ “Presidente Nicolás Maduro propone reabrir las relaciones consulares con Colombia”, *América Economía*, 30 January 2020; “Maduro aboga por ‘normalizar’ relaciones con Colombia rotas durante su gestión”, *France 24*, 21 October 2021; “Asamblea Nacional de 2020 crea comisión para trabajar con el Senado de Colombia”, *El Nacional*, 21 October 2021.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Colombian foreign ministry official, 12 August 2022. “Colombia necesitará \$26.000 millones para retomar actividad consular en Venezuela”, *W Radio*, 2 August 2022.

⁵⁹ Consulates are set to reopen in five cities: Caracas, San Cristóbal, Puerto Ayacucho, Maracaibo and Puerto Ordaz. “Embajador Benedetti explica cómo se restablecerán las relaciones con Venezuela”, *El Tiempo*, 10 September 2022; “Poco a poco Cancillería conforma embajada en Venezuela con diplomáticos de carrera”, *W Radio*, 18 October 2022.

⁶⁰ “Es necesario que Colombia le compre gas a Venezuela”: Armando Benedetti”, *Semana*, 6 September 2022.

The Venezuelan government faces its own challenges in restoring consular services but is farther behind in addressing them. A fire swept through the Venezuelan consulate in Bogotá in April; the building has also suffered acts of vandalism and is reportedly in ruins.⁶¹ At the time of writing, a date for the resumption of Venezuelan consular services in Colombia is unknown.

Officials on both sides expect that trade could rebound swiftly. A shared interest in boosting commercial ties largely drove the swift restoration of relations, with Germán Umaña, Petro's trade minister and a former head of the Colombian-Venezuelan chamber of commerce, playing a big role.⁶² Rising oil prices and the private sector's resurgence following the liberalisation of price and other economic controls could fan demand from Venezuela, which is highly dependent on imports.⁶³ De facto dollarisation in Venezuela could also lower the barriers to trade, because companies willing to import from Colombia tend to have access to foreign currency. But renewed trade will still have to navigate the difficulties created by the regime of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and the legal risks it poses for commerce with state-linked entities.⁶⁴ Under U.S. pressure, the Petro government decided not to allow state-owned Venezuelan airline Conviasa to resume flights to Colombia. The decision sparked a formal protest from the Maduro government, which in turn suspended authorisation for other airlines to fly from Bogotá to Caracas.⁶⁵

In practice, there is still a long way to go before trade and investment can flow smoothly between the two nations. Although the border reopening has allowed the passage of trucks, there is a 30 tonne load limit, due to the fragile state of some bridges, while approval for cross-border public transport and permission for private vehicles to drive across the frontier is still pending.⁶⁶ The Venezuelan economy also suffers from high levels of corruption and a severely weakened financial and banking system, which coupled with the absence of the rule of law, could discourage Colombian investment in the country.⁶⁷ Colombia's new ambassador has recognised that his

⁶¹ José Restrepo, "Las ruinas del Consulado de Venezuela en Bogotá que Duque le deja a Petro", *La Silla Vacía*, 3 August 2022.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Colombian foreign ministry official, Bogotá, October 2022.

⁶³ Maduro has admitted that between 2014 and 2020, Venezuela experienced "the sharpest drop in foreign income in its history", and that the country is "highly dependent on imports". "Venezuela cerró 2020 con un 98,6 % menos de ingresos que en 2013", EFE, 13 January 2021.

⁶⁴ "Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions", Congressional Research Service, 23 May 2022.

⁶⁵ "Las relaciones entre Colombia y Venezuela chocan en el aire: 'Alentamos al Gobierno a negar derechos de aterrizaje'", *El País*, 28 September 2022.

⁶⁶ "Qué ha cambiado en la frontera entre Colombia y Venezuela a 3 semanas de la esperada apertura", BBC Mundo, 13 October 2022.

⁶⁷ Venezuela has a debt 2.5 times greater than the country's GDP and no credit rating valuation since the "C" or "extremely speculative" score granted by Moody's in September 2021. "Venezuela – Indicators", Trading Economics, November 2022. Due to an oil price windfall in 2021, the country's GDP and national budget contracted less than expected, with a fall in GDP of -1.5 per cent and in national budget of -4.5 per cent in 2021. While the country saw rising exports of oil-related products and petrochemicals in 2022, they have been offset by a fall in oil exports due to reduced production. "Venezuela's October oil exports tumble on weaker production", Reuters, 2 November 2022; Asdrúbal Oliveros, "Financiamiento en Venezuela: ¿Dónde estamos y cuáles son los retos?", *Economía UCAB*, 4 May 2022; "Venezuela ranked 139 out of 139 countries on rule of law", World Justice Project, 14 October 2021.

government will have to help Colombian businesses recover assets that were expropriated by Venezuela.⁶⁸

The restoration of full diplomatic relations, for its part, has happened at break-neck speed. Petro and Maduro announced their chosen ambassadors on 11 August, with Armando Benedetti, one of the first establishment politicians to support Petro's bid for the presidency and one of his closest advisers during the campaign, designated as Colombia's envoy. In his short time in the job, Benedetti has already seized media attention with a number of piquant remarks. He insulted Juan Guaidó, for instance, calling him an "idiot", only to offer an apology soon afterward. Some in the Colombian government's upper echelons appear less than enamoured of his positions and modes of behaviour.⁶⁹

As Venezuela's ambassador, Maduro appointed Félix Plasencia, who until recently was foreign minister. Before and after his stint at the foreign ministry, Plasencia was largely in charge of diversifying Venezuela's commercial relationships in response to the constraints imposed by U.S. sanctions.⁷⁰ His appointment signals the premium that the Venezuelan government has placed on expanding economic ties.

Among the measures both agreed to move quickly on was reactivation of law enforcement cooperation, allowing both governments to request police or judicial operations on the other's territory. Bogotá's mayor, Claudia López, has voiced her hope that the agreement will allow police from the two countries to share information enabling the capture of criminal bosses, arguing that Venezuelan outfits like the Tren de Aragua order killings and manage illicit rackets from inside Venezuelan jails.⁷¹ At the same time, a number of those who have fled persecution in Venezuela are alarmed that renewed law enforcement ties could be used to extradite the Maduro government's opponents from Colombia.⁷² Petro has sought to assuage the concerns of human rights activists and opposition figures by insisting that Colombia will respect the right to asylum – although very few of the Venezuelans in Colombia have formal refugee status – and asking the Maduro government to return to the inter-American human rights system, although that step would require Venezuela's re-entry into the Organization of American States.⁷³

⁶⁸ "Embajador Benedetti explica cómo se restablecerán las relaciones con Venezuela", *El Tiempo*, 10 September 2022.

⁶⁹ Benedetti embraced most of the Venezuelan government's leading lights in his first visit to the country as ambassador. Since then, he has cast doubt on the numbers measuring how many Venezuelans have left the country, criticised the Venezuelan opposition and argued that the country's high poverty rate is the by-product of sanctions imposed mainly by the U.S. Crisis Group interview, Colombian foreign ministry official, 4 November 2022. "La disculpa de Benedetti a Guaidó por insultos: 'No debí haber dicho eso'", *El Tiempo*, 9 November 2022.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan academic, 23 June 2022.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Mayor Claudia López, Bogotá, 26 September 2022. "Claudia López pidió a Venezuela tomar acciones contra Niño Guerrero y Giovanni, cabecillas del Tren de Aragua", *Semana*, 6 September 2022.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan opposition leader, Bogotá, 29 June 2022.

⁷³ A reported 1,300 Venezuelans had refugee status in Colombia as of the end of 2021. See "Refugiados venezolanos reconocidos", R4V. Maduro pulled Venezuela out of the Organization of American States in 2017. "Petro le pide oficialmente a Maduro que regrese al sistema interamericano de justicia", *El País*, 25 September 2022. Petro has also asked Venezuela to return to the Andean Community, a customs union comprising Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru that Caracas left in

B. Peace Talks

The quest to demobilise armed groups that have expanded from Colombia across the border into Venezuela, above all the ELN and FARC dissidents, stands out as an urgent challenge facing the Petro government, as well as one of the thorniest. Colombia's new leadership has made its commitment to the cause very clear, with President Petro vowing to pursue talks with the ELN and other armed bands to achieve what his government labels "total peace" in Colombia.⁷⁴

Both Bogotá and Caracas recognise that such talks will require Venezuela's cooperation. Speaking after his first visit to Caracas in late August, Colombia's new ambassador Benedetti acknowledged that "we need the Venezuelan government to accompany us" in handling cross-border armed outfits.⁷⁵ Soon afterward, Venezuela announced it had accepted the Petro government's invitation to take part as a guarantor, and one of the hosts, in negotiations between Bogotá and the ELN. After meeting in Caracas, the Colombian government and the ELN declared on 4 October that they had agreed to start formal talks, which began in Venezuela on 21 November.⁷⁶

The challenge is enormous. The ELN's presence in Venezuela dates back decades, as the group has long used the country as a strategic safe haven for its insurgency against the Colombian state. But as noted above, since 2017 its footprint in Venezuela has expanded as the group has reportedly recruited fighters and engaged in illicit businesses, including gold mining, often in connivance with local authorities and security forces.⁷⁷ Reportedly, the guerrillas have also kept a watchful eye on politics in communities close to the border, helping temper fears in Caracas that these strategically important areas may come under the influence of the opposition or armed groups allied to it. In some instances, the rebels' control of communities has won public backing due to the perception that they have instilled a measure of rough justice, leading to drops in violent and other crime.⁷⁸

At present, there seem to be few incentives for the ELN to abandon their haven in Venezuelan territory. The authorities have by all appearances consented to their presence; they are recruiting new troops, including Venezuelan nationals; and they exercise control of lucrative illicit businesses such as gold mining and drug, cattle and fuel trafficking. They are especially strong in the borderlands, which are their military bastion.⁷⁹ This position of strength allows guerrilla forces to enjoy freedom

2006 in protest at U.S. talks with Colombia about a free trade deal. "Venezuela evalúa volver a la Comunidad Andina de Naciones", *La Vanguardia*, 14 September 2022.

⁷⁴ "Gustavo Petro propone 'proceso de paz integral' con todos los actores violentos", *El Tiempo*, 8 May 2022.

⁷⁵ "Armando Benedetti: 'El toro más grande para Gustavo Petro será Venezuela'", *El Tiempo*, 31 August 2022; "Lo que Gustavo Petro quiere de Nicolás Maduro", *Al Navío*, 1 September 2022; "Venezuela otra vez", *El Tiempo*, 31 August 2022.

⁷⁶ "Gobierno y Eln anuncian desde Caracas el reinicio formal de diálogos de paz", *El Espectador*, 4 October 2022.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group Reports, *Gold and Grief*; and *A Glut of Arms*, both op. cit.

⁷⁸ Some indigenous communities have also criticised the recruitment of young people by the guerrillas. Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ Colombian authorities estimated that the ELN had over 5,000 combatants and members of its support network in 2021, a sharp rise from under 3,000 in 2016. Its greatest area of strength now lies in the Arauca-Apure area and Catatumbo, along the border with Venezuela, where its Eastern

of movement across the border: they have reportedly shifted hundreds of combatants in recent months from Venezuela to Colombia, above all to Arauca, Catatumbo and Chocó, to consolidate their territorial grip and ensure their supremacy over rival groups ahead of peace talks.⁸⁰ Colombian officials have not conditioned talks on the ELN surrendering its arms, indicating that they might accept an agreement for a gradual handover of weapons.⁸¹

Against this backdrop, the Maduro government's position regarding negotiations is likely to be essential to the talks' success. Critics argue that the Maduro government should not be playing the role of guarantor, given the widely reported relations between local officials and the ELN inside Venezuela.⁸² But Bogotá appears to have calculated that for an eventual peace agreement to be effective in Colombia, the ELN will have to comply in Venezuelan territory as well as in Colombia. By including Caracas as a guarantor, the Petro government appears to have taken a calculated risk that the former will act constructively, even though a number of observers do not yet have confidence that all parts of the Venezuelan state will honour the terms of a negotiated deal.⁸³ A question Bogotá will need to weigh carefully is what assurances it might encourage Caracas to give the guerrillas regarding their post-demobilisation activities, including whether they might remain in Venezuela as former combatants seeking to disarm and return to civilian life.

It remains to be seen whether perceptions that elements of the Venezuelan state are complicit with the ELN will generate discomfort in the negotiations, or whether Caracas will play a double game by hosting the talks while at the same time withholding its full support. The Maduro government could upset the talks without overtly walking away from its responsibilities. For example, should it feel threatened or slighted by its neighbour in other areas, it could signal to local officials colluding with the ELN's decentralised "fronts" – which operate with considerable autonomy from the guerrilla's central command – that they can continue to operate with impunity and need not negotiate with Bogotá.⁸⁴

C. *The Border*

President Petro stressed that reopening the border would be an early step in restoring ties with Venezuela and, indeed, on 26 September, the frontier was formally opened to allow passage of two cargo trucks.⁸⁵ Yet many questions remain about cross-border cooperation between the two countries' national, regional and local authorities, especially in addressing shared security threats and transnational criminal net-

War Front (Frente de Guerra Oriental) operates. See "¿Cuál es el ELN que se sentará a dialogar? Radiografía en cuatro regiones de Colombia", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, August 2022.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian military officer, Bogotá, September 2022.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, representatives of the High Commissioner for Peace office, Bogotá, September and October 2022.

⁸² "Why Venezuela's role in Colombia's peace talks could become a problem", *Colombia Reports*, 17 October 2022.

⁸³ Ana León, "El chavismo es un mal necesario en la negociación de Petro con el ELN", *La Silla Vacía*, 15 September 2022.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Colombian journalist, 16 August 2022. On the ELN's historically decentralised structure, see Crisis Group Report, *The Missing Peace*, op. cit.

⁸⁵ "Colombia y Venezuela se abren la puerta económica", *El País*, 26 September 2022.

works. A particularly delicate aspect of the future relationship concerns the extent of cooperation between the two countries' armed forces. Although contact between the defence ministers has resumed, building fuller ties will be challenging.⁸⁶

When it comes to relations with Venezuela's armed forces, Petro does not have an entirely free hand. He needs to maintain the Colombian military's loyalty in his efforts to reform security policy and make progress in peace talks with armed groups, as well as to address deep mistrust of his left-leaning agenda and outlook in the traditionally more conservative ranks.⁸⁷ Colombia must also weigh the support allegedly provided by Venezuela's military to armed groups on Venezuelan soil, as well as its reported links to the Russian army and other perceived "malign actors", including drug traffickers. Its military is also likely to shy away from working with Venezuelan forces accused of human rights violations, such as the National Guard.⁸⁸ The Colombian armed forces' close U.S. allies may also be reluctant to see strengthened coordination with Venezuela.⁸⁹

On the other side of the border, animosity toward the Colombian armed forces in the Venezuelan military also runs high.⁹⁰ The reported recruitment by Colombian intelligence of sources within the Venezuelan armed forces does not improve the atmosphere.⁹¹ Bruising verbal exchanges between authorities on both sides have also caused lingering ill-will.

Accordingly, for now, any prospect of more extensive intelligence sharing or strategic cooperation between the two militaries appears remote. Most recently, the announcement that the two countries' intelligence services will start working together again reportedly did not go down well with the Colombian military.⁹²

As for other forms of security cooperation, there has been some liaison to date, but building on it will be no easy task.⁹³ Addressing the abuses perpetrated by crimi-

⁸⁶ "Ministro Iván Velásquez confirmó conversaciones con su homólogo venezolano Vladimir Padrino", *Infobae*, 23 September 2022.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Trapped in Conflict*, op. cit.; "Una cúpula adversa y guerrillera: los retos de Petro con los militares", *El País*, 4 July 2022.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian military officer, Bogotá, September 2022.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian military officer, Bogotá, 6 July 2021. "Malign actors" was the expression used by Senator James Risch, a Republican from Idaho, during the "Senate Foreign Relations Hearing on Assessing U.S. Policy Towards Venezuela", video, YouTube, 15 September 2022. Within U.S. and Colombian military and security institutions, the Maduro government is widely regarded as a menace to the region, while senior Venezuelan officials, such as the president and defence minister, are wanted by the U.S. Department of Justice for crimes including drug trafficking. See also Douglas Farah, "The Maduro Regime's Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America", Atlantic Council, 14 August 2020; "Venezuela a threat to regional stability, security – U.S. official", Reuters, 30 October 2018.

⁹⁰ "Maduro refuerza la operaciones militares en la frontera con Colombia para desarticular a los grupos TANCOL", Europa Press, 3 June 2022; "Fuerza armada venezolana dice que desmanteló grupo de 'terroristas colombianos'", *El Espectador*, 29 March 2022.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian police officer, Bogotá, February 2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Colombian foreign ministry official, 4 November 2022.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Colombian regional official, Brussels, 13 May 2022. In early 2022, Freddy Bernal, the governor of Venezuela's Táchira state, notified the governor of Colombia's Norte de Santander department, Silvano Serrano, that several inmates linked to the Venezuelan criminal gang Tren de Aragua had escaped from a prison and crossed the border into Colombia. Bernal provided

nal outfits operating close to the border in both countries – such as forced displacement, child recruitment, disappearances and murders – will test the security forces' ability to work together, as each side continues to see the other as untrustworthy.⁹⁴ Colombian authorities tend to view their Venezuelan counterparts with suspicion, worrying that they are complicit with the criminal actors they are ostensibly targeting.⁹⁵ Venezuelan authorities for their part are likely to seek assurances that Colombian officials will be vigilant in preventing their territory from being used by mercenary groups as a base for plots against *chavismo*, as occurred with Operation Gideon in 2020.⁹⁶

The challenges facing law enforcement on both sides of the border are formidable. Authorities in the Colombian department of Norte de Santander, for instance, believe that criminal groups regularly hide corpses of victims killed in Venezuela on Colombia's side the border, driving a spike in the number of reported homicides in that region.⁹⁷ Human trafficking networks and criminal groups that sometimes operate on both sides of the border also prey on Venezuelan migrants and refugees. These include the ELN, which allegedly offers one-off payments to new recruits and provides temporary lodging to migrants in the border department of Arauca.⁹⁸

Whereas joint efforts against serious transnational crime may be hard to achieve, more fluid ties between the two governments and the full opening of the border would ideally pave the way for greater cooperation on security issues like border control, even if initial efforts are limited in scale and hedged with caution on both sides. Establishing safe formal crossings will depend on regular communication among border posts, aimed at making sure that people and goods pass along official routes so as to avoid the armed groups running informal crossings. Progress thus far has been slow, with Colombian officials and Petro himself expressing disappointment at the pace of efforts to rein in corruption at formal crossings and dismantle informal routes and smuggling.⁹⁹

In a positive step, which started prior to Petro's administration, governors of the Norte de Santander department in Colombia and Táchira in Venezuela – Silvano Serrano and Freddy Bernal, respectively – established a communication channel in 2021 to discuss problems on the border.¹⁰⁰ The relationship has grown stronger despite controversy surrounding Bernal, who has been accused of ties with the violent para-police groups, known as *colectivos*, that are loyal to *chavista* politicians.¹⁰¹

Serrano with their location and they were later arrested. The Colombian government has also used the channel between Bernal and Serrano to send messages to the Maduro government.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, security sources, October and November 2022.

⁹⁶ "Gustavo Petro concede a Noticias Caracol su primera entrevista tras ser elegido presidente", *Noticias Caracol*, 22 June 2022.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Colombian regional official, Brussels, 13 May 2022.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven*, op. cit.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Colombian foreign ministry official, 4 November 2022. "La reapertura de la frontera no aumentó el comercio en Norte de Santander", *El Espectador*, 30 October 2022.

¹⁰⁰ First appointed by Maduro as "protector" of the state, Bernal was elected in November 2021 as governor.

¹⁰¹ The late Colombian Foreign Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo also asserted in September 2019 that Bernal was operating as the link between the Maduro government and the ELN in border areas.

Shortly before Petro took office, in an early meeting between high-level officials, the incoming Colombian foreign minister, Álvaro Leyva, visited Bernal in the city of San Cristóbal to discuss re-establishing relations and opening border crossings.¹⁰²

As for commerce, in general, authorities in border states have warmly embraced the goal of reactivating formal trade and rebuilding close ties. In his successful 2021 campaign to become governor of Táchira, Bernal insisted on the need to create jobs and businesses by boosting cross-border trade.¹⁰³ On the Colombian side, national and Norte de Santander authorities have already said that the Tienditas bridge – built to expand possibilities for cross-border trade but never opened because of soured bilateral relations – will open in early 2023, creating the capacity for roughly 80,000 daily vehicle crossings between the two countries.

D. *Washington, Latin America and the “Interim Presidency”*

Relations between the U.S. and Colombian government, traditionally Washington’s strongest partner in South America, will also shape Bogotá’s ties with Caracas.

Bogotá will doubtless continue to see preserving its longstanding relationship with the U.S. government as in Colombia’s interest, even under a left-leaning government seeking to pursue greater diversity in its foreign partnerships. Petro’s initial dealings with the U.S., including receiving a visit to Bogotá by U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, have proven eminently cordial, despite differences on issues such as extraditions and the U.S. approach to Cuba, as well as possible tensions about counter-narcotics policy, particularly regarding Petro’s wish to limit the forced eradication of coca and press for greater debate about the “war on drugs”.¹⁰⁴ Any marked deterioration in the relationship would pose numerous risks for Colombia. Bogotá looks to Washington for support in many areas – eg, development (including health sector) assistance, fulfilling the 2016 peace accord and strengthening resilience to climate change. Should Washington’s backing waver, it could alarm foreign investors and even Colombia’s military, which is very close to the U.S.¹⁰⁵

In any case, there is little reason to believe that the U.S. is presently opposed to renewed ties between Colombia and Venezuela. Washington has shown its own readiness to engage once again with the Venezuelan government through several high-

“Canciller colombiano pide en la OEA ‘detener la amenaza’ que implica presunta relación de Maduro con la guerrilla”, *Contrapunto*, 11 September 2019; “La poderosa mujer señalada de ser el enlace entre el ELN y Maduro”, *El Tiempo*, 15 September 2019.

¹⁰² Venezuela’s foreign minister and a representative from the UN Mission in Colombia also attended. “Se estableció el primer paso para reabrir la frontera”, *La Opinión*, 29 July 2022.

¹⁰³ Ana León, “La reapertura de la frontera se hizo a pesar de Duque, no gracias a él”, *La Silla Vacía*, 5 October 2021. Bernal said the Maduro government is intent on opening the border to trade, as long as Colombia complies with biosafety measures. Milagros Palomares and Laura Cristancho, “Claves para entender reapertura de la frontera anunciada por el gobierno Duque”, *Proyecto Migración Venezuela*, 20 May 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Colombian diplomat, 8 November 2022. “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Colombian President Gustavo Petro at a Joint Press Availability”, U.S. Department of State, 3 October 2022.

¹⁰⁵ “Petro presidente: cómo puede cambiar ahora la estrecha alianza de Colombia con EE.UU. y su relación con Venezuela”, *BBC Mundo*, 21 June 2022; “Petro inaugura una nueva era en las relaciones con Estados Unidos”, *El País*, 19 July 2022.

level visits in 2022 by U.S. delegations to Caracas, including meetings with Maduro himself.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, improved ties between Colombia and Venezuela could serve U.S. interests in the region, for example, by enabling the Biden administration to overcome resistance in Congress to opening a more formal communication channel with President Maduro and greenlighting sanctions relief. Speculation that moves may be afoot among Venezuela's opposition parties and the U.S. to drop recognition of Guaidó as "interim president" suggests further potential alignment between the two countries on Venezuela policy.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, the Petro government's strengthening ties with Caracas risk becoming a source of tension should negotiations between government and opposition in Venezuela get bogged down. U.S. officials have expressed their hopes that a "constructive and respectful" bilateral relationship with Colombia can help achieve "a peaceful solution" in Venezuela, a prospect that hinges upon Washington's view on achieving a free and fair presidential election in 2024.¹⁰⁸ Should Maduro eschew major electoral and political concessions, this expectation on Washington's part could place Petro in the difficult spot of deciding which relationship is less costly to imperil: Caracas, essential to "total peace" and a stable border area; or Washington, vital to broader military and security cooperation, as well as global trade and foreign investment.

At the same time, these complex potential trade-offs afford an opportunity for shuttle diplomacy among Caracas, Bogotá and Washington, as illustrated by Ambassador Benedetti's return from his first trip to Venezuela, when he met with Jimmy Story, the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela, who operates from Bogotá.¹⁰⁹ U.S. Secretary of State Blinken has since confirmed that he has discussed with his Colombian counterpart "our cooperation to support democracy in Venezuela", thereby hinting that Bogotá could aim to work alongside Washington in encouraging a negotiated settlement of Venezuela's political dispute.¹¹⁰

In the meantime, the fact that under Petro, Colombia no longer recognises Guaidó's claim to be Venezuela's "interim president", whereas Washington continues to

¹⁰⁶ Gunson, "A Twist in Caracas", op. cit. See also "US officials back in Venezuela in a bid to rebuild ties", AP, 28 June 2022; and "Possible Russia oil embargo drives US outreach to Venezuela", AP, 7 March 2022.

¹⁰⁷ "Venezuela opposition parties consider ditching 'interim president'", *Financial Times*, 20 October 2022.

¹⁰⁸ "EEUU desea trabajar con Petro hacia una 'solución pacífica' en Venezuela", EFE, 31 August 2022; "Habla por primera vez Luis Gilberto Murillo, embajador en Washington: Colombia propone sí o sí cambios en lucha antidrogas y extradición", *Semana*, 18 September 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Benedetti has said: "Whatever is going to be done has to go hand in hand with the United States. Nothing we are going to do is going to take them by surprise. I have reiterated that the channels to talk to me when they want are open". "Es necesario que Colombia le compre gas a Venezuela": Armando Benedetti", op. cit. Later on, Benedetti also stated that "we are not here because of ideology or for anything other than reactivating the economy on the border". "Gobierno Biden nunca se ha quejado de nosotros: Armando Benedetti", W Radio, 26 September 2022.

¹¹⁰ Secretary Blinken said: "Following my visit to Bogota, I was glad to meet with Foreign Minister @AlvaroLeyva on the margins of the @OAS official General Assembly to discuss our cooperation to support democracy in Venezuela and provide assistance to Venezuelan migrants and their host communities". Tweet by Antony Blinken, U.S. secretary of state, @SecBlinken, 9:55am, 6 October 2022.

recognise it, has certain practical implications.¹¹¹ One of these involves Monómeros, a Colombian firm indirectly owned by Venezuela's state-run oil company PDVSA, and dedicated to producing fertilisers.¹¹² The prior Colombian government's recognition of Guaidó permitted the Venezuelan opposition to appoint an ad hoc board of directors for Pequiven, the main shareholder of Monómeros. But following formal recognition by the Petro government of Maduro, the rival Pequiven board of directors appointed by the Venezuelan president was able to change the management of Monómeros.

Petro himself welcomed the move due to the sharp rise in imported fertiliser prices caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but Colombia has had to request assurances from the U.S. government that the firm will be able to continue operating despite the change of management.¹¹³ In late September, Ambassador Benedetti celebrated that his government had been able to buy "with a discount" 16,000 tonnes of urea from Pequiven, highlighting that Venezuela had not charged for transport and that Colombian farmers were going to be able to save \$100 per tonne of urea.¹¹⁴

Re-establishing commercial flights has also proven more cumbersome than expected. Following a complaint from the U.S. government, Colombia decided to revoke authorisation for Venezuela's state-owned airline Conviasa – sanctioned by Washington since February 2020 – to run flights between the two countries.¹¹⁵ In response, Venezuela withdrew the permit it had granted to the airline Wingo to start operating flights between Colombia and Venezuela. As of this writing, there are only two airlines flying regularly between the countries: Turpial, a Venezuelan carrier owned by a retired air force colonel, and Satena, which is partially owned by Colombia's air force.¹¹⁶

E. *Regional and Multilateral Challenges*

As further steps are taken to consolidate working ties, closer relations with Caracas could pose certain diplomatic and legal headaches for Bogotá. International bodies such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Council have pointed to systematic human rights violations and per-

¹¹¹ "¿Podría deteriorarse la relación con Estados Unidos tras la nueva propuesta de extradición?", Noticias RCN, 25 August 2022; "A pesar de las 'diferencias' entre Estados Unidos y Colombia, se mantendrá el diálogo", EFE, 9 August 2022; Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli and Adam Isacson, "Cinco prioridades para la nueva era de las relaciones Estados Unidos-Colombia", Washington Office on Latin America, 5 August 2022.

¹¹² "Venezuela's Monómeros files for bankruptcy", Argus Media, 23 September 2021.

¹¹³ Petro also denounced scandals at Monómeros while under the control of the Guaidó-led opposition. Colombian authorities had ordered a temporary intervention in the firm in 2021. Marianela Palacios, "Venezuelan Foreign Asset War: Monómeros", *Caracas Chronicles*, 24 September 2021; "Armando Benedetti: En Colombia hay más violaciones de DDHH que en Venezuela", *Efecto Cocuyo*, 8 November 2022.

¹¹⁴ "Embajador de Colombia celebra compra 'con descuento' de 16.000 toneladas de urea al gobierno de Maduro", *Runrunes*, 23 September 2022.

¹¹⁵ In the words of the U.S. government, "the illegitimate Maduro regime relies on the Venezuelan state-owned airline Conviasa to shuttle corrupt regime officials around the world to fuel support for its anti-democratic efforts". "Treasury Pressures Illegitimate Maduro Regime by Identifying Blocked National Airline", U.S. Department of Treasury, 7 February 2020.

¹¹⁶ "Airline flights resume between Colombia and Venezuela", AP, 7 November 2022.

sistent restrictions on civic and democratic space in Venezuela.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court continues to investigate alleged crimes against humanity committed in Venezuela since a 2017 crackdown against opposition protests.¹¹⁸ It is possible that at some stage during Petro's term of office the court will issue an arrest warrant for a senior Venezuelan government or security official should the Maduro government fail to make progress in investigating these charges. If that were to happen, Petro's efforts to cooperate with Caracas and assist the Maduro government in regaining international legitimacy could come into tension with the court's efforts to ensure the accountability of high-level Venezuelan officials.¹¹⁹

The Colombian government might also find itself in a tight spot if handed extradition requests by Caracas. Shortly after Petro took office, Diosdado Cabello, a prominent *chavista* National Assembly member and strongman, suggested that many opposition figures living in Colombia should be extradited to face charges "for crimes committed against our nation".¹²⁰ With some Venezuelan oppositionists who fled to Colombia to escape persecution in their homeland having voiced anxiety as to how the Colombian government may respond to extradition demands, Petro sought to allay concerns. He responded to Cabello at once, insisting that his government would "guarantee the right to asylum".¹²¹ Cabello in turn downplayed the incident, saying Venezuela would not "tarnish" the restoration of relations.¹²²

Diplomacy toward Venezuela is also likely to affect another of Petro's cherished foreign policy objectives, that of greater Latin American integration to enable stronger coordination in areas such as climate change, migration, health and tackling organised crime. Recent years have witnessed a marked decline in the health of the region's main spaces for cooperation. Bitter interstate squabbles – above all, regarding

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bogotá, 30 September 2022. In her last statement on Venezuela as UN high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet highlighted the government's progress toward addressing human rights violations, such as restructuring the police Special Action Forces, in line with previous UN recommendations. But she expressed continued concern over conditions in detention centres run by the government's intelligence services, with victims of arbitrary arrests still in jail. She also highlighted continued restrictions on civil and democratic space. "Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner's report on Venezuela", UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 June 2022.

¹¹⁸ Mariano de Alba, "Venezuela: International Criminal Court Probe Puts Maduro in a Quandary", Crisis Group Commentary, 12 November 2021.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, as an International Criminal Court state party it would be required to arrest and deliver to The Hague any indictee who travels to Colombia.

¹²⁰ "Diosdado Cabello pidió a Colombia que extradite opositores solicitados por justicia de Venezuela", BluRadio, 22 August 2022.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan opposition leader, Bogotá, 29 June 2022. Petro has denied that exiles, activists and journalists persecuted by the Venezuelan government could be extradited at the request of Caracas, declaring that "human rights are fundamental". "Gustavo Petro: 'Si fracaso, las tinieblas arrasarán con todo'", *El País*, 28 June 2022; "Maduro's enemies are fleeing Colombia as persecution fears mount", *Bloomberg*, 5 July 2022.

¹²² "Gustavo Petro rechazó pedido de Diosdado Cabello de extraditar opositores venezolanos: 'Colombia garantiza el derecho de asilo'", *Infobae*, 23 August 2022; "Diosdado Cabello declaró que respetaba decisión del presidente Petro de no extraditar a exiliados venezolanos", *Infobae*, 25 August 2022.

the response to Venezuela's and other countries' rising authoritarianism – the decline of institutions such as the Union of South American Nations and the Organization of American States, and the failure to coordinate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, have left the cause of regional integration in disarray.¹²³ The new Colombian government's declared ambition to repair these rifts could be bolstered by a wave of left-leaning governments in the region, and by the return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as Brazilian president in early 2023.¹²⁴

Even so, the constraints on any push for regional unity are pronounced. Petro's declared priority for Latin America as a whole is addressing climate change, an issue on which there is a general but not unanimous agreement.¹²⁵ But pressing for deeper regional coordination on issues such as democracy, good governance or human rights among governments of extremely diverse political orientations, with some displaying marked authoritarian tendencies, as in Venezuela, Nicaragua and elsewhere, will be immensely challenging.¹²⁶ Adopting a policy on non-interference in the sovereign affairs of other nations, along the lines of the approach embraced by the Mexican government, may help prevent diplomatic spats, but could well impede the construction of strong, purposeful regional institutions. Human rights are a case in point, as repressive governments tend to reject outside scrutiny of such matters as undue interference in internal affairs.

Petro has given frequent, emphatic support to human rights protection, above all inside Colombia, and has sought to goad Venezuela back toward the inter-American system of human rights. But he appears somewhat reluctant to place this cause at the heart of a resurgent Latin America multilateral system. He has proposed to reboot regional integration by strengthening the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), a body that operates by unanimity, does not include the U.S. and Canada, and is seen by some Latin American governments as an alternative to the Organization of American States. The Mexican and Colombian governments appear broadly aligned in their backing for CELAC, with Maduro also supportive of giving the bloc greater prominence. Since its creation in February 2010, however, the organisation has mostly been a political coordination forum, with Brazil deciding to suspend its participation in early 2020 on the grounds that the bloc was being used as a showcase for non-democratic governments.¹²⁷

¹²³ Juan Gabriel Tokatlán, "El descalabro del sistema interamericano", *Nueva Sociedad*, September 2020.

¹²⁴ Raquel López-Portillo Maltos, "Los cuatro ejes de la política exterior de Gustavo Petro", *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, 23 June 2022.

¹²⁵ "Así fue el discurso de Gustavo Petro tras ganar la Presidencia: 'No vamos a traicionar al electorado'", RCN Noticias, 19 June 2022; "Palabras del Presidente de la República, Gustavo Petro Urrego, al tomar posesión como Jefe de Estado", Colombian Foreign Ministry, 7 August 2022; "Petro pidió integración eléctrica y energética de Suramérica en la CAN", *Portafolio*, 29 August 2022.

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch wrote a letter to Petro requesting that he "maintain a strong focus on helping to address the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela". "Letter to Colombian President Gustavo Petro on the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the Nicolás Maduro government", Human Rights Watch, 24 October 2022.

¹²⁷ "Venezuela propone creación de Secretaría General en VI Cumbre Celac", Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación de Venezuela, 19 September 2021; "Brazil sits out leftist Latin American nations' body on anti-democracy fears", Reuters, 16 January 2020.

V. Recommendations

Petro's government is unlikely to find reconstruction of strong, trusting relations with its neighbour straightforward. Years of mutual disparagement, non-recognition by Bogotá of the government in Caracas, and formidable security, economic and humanitarian dilemmas mean that diplomats will have to tread carefully. The tendency of powerful political factions in both countries to blame their neighbour for stirring up unrest has meant that each state has become seen as a part of the other's conflicts and crises. These tensions are aggravated by the tendency on both sides, reinforced by their respective allies, to resort to "microphone diplomacy" in which grievances are aired publicly and pointedly.¹²⁸

A sensible place to start, as both governments seem to acknowledge, is through practical coordination aimed at bringing immediate material improvement to people's lives. Fully opening formal border crossings and ridding them of corruption, as well as ensuring that consular services are available in both countries, would spare migrants and travellers many woes, while also potentially bringing economic relief to border areas that have grown increasingly reliant on informal and illicit business.

In parallel, embarking on talks with the ELN creates a significant opportunity, but working with Caracas will be tricky. Establishing what could be expected of Venezuela in eventual demobilisation of the guerrillas will require discreet diplomacy and avoidance of public accusations regarding possible flare-ups of violence on the border. Done right, it can also help rebuild mutual trust and confidence.

At the same time, both governments should pursue the task of rebuilding the institutional framework for managing shared interests at the national, regional and local levels. Ties should not be limited to connections between national governments, but rather should be decentralised and fostered between authorities at the regional and local levels.¹²⁹ Private-sector actors in both countries have been playing a leading role in renewing trade links, but they are growing increasingly concerned about the lack of a clear timetable for full restoration of bilateral commerce. Dislodging illicit businesses from control of cross-border trade and movement is also proving more complex than either government appeared to believe.¹³⁰ Despite abiding mistrust between the two countries' security forces, cautious steps toward greater cooperation that draw for support on regional authorities, civil society and, potentially, technical expertise from abroad can help rebuild ties and will be needed to loosen the hold of illicit networks on the border economy.

Meanwhile, foreign donor and multilateral bodies, notably the UN Mission in Colombia and other UN agencies in both countries, should support efforts to rebuild civilian and military relations so as to consolidate peace and ensure that essential

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan government supporter, Madrid, 4 April 2022. "Diplomacia de micrófono", *El Tiempo*, 4 August 2009; "Diplomacia, bravucunadas y micrófonos", *El Espectador*, 9 September 2015.

¹²⁹ "Senado aprueba iniciativa que establece el régimen especial de fronteras", *Diario La Libertad*, 2 June 2021.

¹³⁰ Aside from the issue of persistent corruption at official crossings, large price differences between the countries on certain goods, such as fuel, food and cattle, may also cause trafficking to persist. Crisis Group interview, economic analyst, Arauca, March 2022.

information on armed group and criminal activity is shared, especially in the border area.¹³¹ Some civil society groups have called for the appointment of a UN envoy to the border in order to raise international awareness of dire humanitarian conditions there and encourage both states to protect civilians in areas affected by conflict.¹³² An alternative low-key initiative could see the UN or the EU facilitate conversations between the two governments, helping coordination between the many state bodies that have a role to play in the reconstruction of bilateral ties, and providing technical assistance where it would be helpful to building trust and cooperation. A route that the countries' militaries could explore is forging a bilateral annual plan of the sort Colombia has already signed with its neighbours Peru, Panama and Ecuador for border management.¹³³

Consolidation of a robust, harmonious relationship between the two countries will also depend on moves toward a settlement of the overlapping political and humanitarian crises in Venezuela. As Crisis Group has argued elsewhere, an end to the internal struggle for political supremacy that has beset the country for over two decades and sown divisions across Latin America remains essential to the whole region's stability.¹³⁴ A negotiated settlement involving, among other things, a genuinely fair presidential election would help the country turn the corner on decades of extreme political instability. It would also spur the U.S. and EU to lift sanctions, let Venezuela rejoin circuits of international trade and finance, and propel an economic recovery that could allow millions of migrants in the Venezuelan diaspora to return to their homeland should they wish.

Colombia's planning for the restoration of neighbourly relations should include substantial participation in efforts to encourage a political settlement in Venezuela. Petro was wise to pivot away from the Duque's government's counterproductively harsh and adversarial posture toward Venezuela, which was part and parcel of the "maximum pressure" strategy that the U.S. launched to unseat Maduro under President Trump's administration. But in spurning that failed strategy, Colombia should not also turn away from the current generation of international efforts to resolve Venezuela's crisis.¹³⁵

Pursuing both a restoration of ties and a Venezuelan political settlement at the same time will require deft diplomatic footwork on Bogotá's part. On one hand, improving relations with Caracas and reaping the benefits – eg, by securing a peace agreement with armed groups such as the ELN, dealing with migration, and encouraging a relaunch of Latin American solidarity – will require dexterous handling of relations with the Venezuelan government. On the other, supporting a lasting political settlement in Venezuela, including a free and fair presidential election, and maintaining a strong relationship with Washington, will invariably create some friction

¹³¹ "Un enviado especial de la ONU para tratar crisis fronteriza, la petición de Colombia y Venezuela", *La Opinión*, 31 March 2021.

¹³² "Colombia-Venezuela: balance y retos", Puentes Ciudadanos Colombia-Venezuela, July 2022.

¹³³ "Planes Operativos Anuales Binacionales: instrumento y mecanismo de cooperación", Colombian Defence Ministry.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela*, op. cit.

¹³⁵ "Del Foro de París a unos comicios en Venezuela: 'va a ser arduo y difícil'", Deutsche Welle, 12 November 2022.

with Caracas. Should the latter feel that it is being asked to offer practical assistance to the Colombian government, and also being urged by Bogotá to make concessions to its political opposition that it cannot stomach, then it may see fit to cool the newly found warmth in bilateral ties.

Achieving the right policy balance, and avoiding outraged reactions from Caracas in the process, would be easier if Colombia were to act in concert with other outside actors.¹³⁶ The signs are that the Colombian government is moving in this direction. Petro's participation in the Paris Peace Forum, alongside French President Emmanuel Macron, Argentine President Alberto Fernández, Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt, and the heads of the Venezuelan government and opposition negotiating teams, represented a strong show of support for a return to talks.¹³⁷ Days later, on 26 November, the Venezuelan government and opposition announced the resumption of negotiations in Mexico City, and signed an agreement that intends "to promote the well-being of all Venezuelans".¹³⁸ In response, the U.S. government authorised Chevron to expand its oil production in Venezuela and export crude to the U.S., albeit with some limits.¹³⁹

Comprehensive Latin American backing for a negotiated resolution of Venezuela's crises, either through the Norway-facilitated talks in Mexico (which are set to resume in December) or through other formats, could also act as a restraint on and incentive for both President Maduro and the opposition to behave reasonably. Colombia should work to encourage engagement by other regional actors and then count itself in their number.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ "Es necesario que Latinoamérica vuelva a tener voz en el mundo", EFE, 14 March 2022.

¹³⁷ "France seeks to break Venezuela political deadlock at Paris Peace Forum", RFI, 11 November 2022.

¹³⁸ "Joint Statement from the Venezuelan Dialogue and Negotiation Process", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Norway, 26 November 2022. The accord seeks to use the Venezuelan state's frozen foreign assets to support health, education, food provision and infrastructure in the country with the cooperation of the UN. "Venezuela's frozen funds to be gradually released for humanitarian aid", Reuters, 26 November 2022.

¹³⁹ "Treasury Issues Venezuela General License 41 Upon Resumption of Mexico City Talks", U.S. Department of Treasury, 26 November 2022.

¹⁴⁰ "Venezuela arrests more Americans as Maduro seeks better ties", Bloomberg, 13 July 2022.

VI. Conclusion

Due to the range of challenges that need to be overcome and its effects on the lives of millions of people, there is currently no more important bilateral relationship in Latin America than that between Venezuela and Colombia. After almost four years in which Colombia's former President Duque enforced a "diplomatic siege" seeking to topple the Maduro government, the strategy's failure is plain to see. Venezuela remains under *chavista* rule, mired in grinding poverty and riven by political division.

Petro's ascent to the presidency has ushered in a rapid and welcome reconstruction of ties between the two countries. But the legacy of years of mistrust will not be undone so quickly. Colombia and Venezuela will have to rebuild communication channels and institutional mechanisms to deal with a range of shared and competing interests. At the top of the list should be assisting citizens on both sides of the border as they face the insecurity and hardships that have been intensified by the breakdown in diplomatic ties. Their plight has become a humanitarian imperative. The difficulties are not impossible to overcome, as has already been shown by the dialogue between the governors of Norte de Santander and Táchira. They and other authorities in both countries should continue to cooperate for the benefit of the border population. Outside actors, including the UN, the EU and bilateral donors, should stand ready with technical assistance and good offices to help the two sides build confidence and develop new working methods.

At the same time, Bogotá should not allow its commitment to restoring ties to deter it from working with others to encourage a negotiated settlement between the Venezuelan government and its political opponents, even if this effort creates friction in otherwise improving relations. Needless rancour between the two neighbours has not helped advance democracy in Venezuela or served the broader cause of regional stability. Neither, however, will leaving the situation to fester. Taking on both challenges at the same time will not be easy. But it is the best way for Bogotá to help itself, the Venezuelan people and the cause of stability throughout the region.

Bogotá/Caracas/Washington/Brussels, 1 December 2022

Appendix A: Addressing Economic, Humanitarian and Security Concerns





Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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December 2022

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2019

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- Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.
- Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.
- Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.
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