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Marcela Sanchez: Andean Backwardness -- Where the Logical Is Strange

"I'm not often surprised in this job; you can't help but think you've seen it all covering Latin American politics and the likes of Alberto Fujimori, Daniel Ortega and Hugo Chavez for 17 years," says Latin expert Marcela Sanchez. "But this past week when Peruvian President Alan Garcia and I sat down in Lima for an interview, I have to admit I was taken aback by his candor and strong sense of solidarity for his country's neighbors, two traits not very evident among Andean regional leaders these days."



By Marcela Sanchez

LIMA -- I'm not often surprised in this job. You can't help but think you've seen it all covering Latin American politics and the likes of Alberto Fujimori, Daniel Ortega and Hugo Chavez for 17 years.

But this past week when Peruvian President Alan Garcia and I sat down in Lima for an interview, I have to admit I was taken aback by his candor and strong sense of solidarity for his country's neighbors, two traits not very evident among Andean regional leaders these days.

"Send us the Colombian police," he piped up when we talked about drug trafficking and the difficulties of combating it in isolation. "Send them and have them take over Callao," he added, referring to the country's largest international airport.

In Garcia's judgment, Colombian police have developed a level of expertise and sophistication second to none in the region, thanks in large part to Washington's multi-billion dollar support.

The Peruvian leader, of course, is not about to turn the security of his people over to a neighboring force. But he was making two critical points: the Andean region is in this together and Washington is not a threat but potentially a very strong ally.

These sentiments have been largely lost in the noise of recent cross border recrimination. In fact, a similar conversation with another Andean leader about drugs or security threats would likely devolve into expressions of suspicion -- suspicion of Colombians, Americans and their desires to violate national sovereignty.

In other words, tensions far more than cooperation have come to define regional relations. For nearly two years, for example, diplomatic ties between Ecuador and Colombia were severed after the Colombian military raided a camp used by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Ecuadorian territory in March 2008.

And, of course, relations between Venezuela and Colombia over the last couple years have been worse. Ambassadors have been withdrawn, trade frozen, war threatened, and full diplomatic ties cut off, all over security issues such as



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the raid in Ecuador, U.S. military presence in Colombia and accusations that Venezuela harbors FARC guerrillas in its territory.



During our interview, made possible by an initiative of The Carter Center to promote better understanding between the Andean nations and with the United States, Garcia lamented that Peru missed the boat when the U.S. agreed to help Colombia in its fight against drugs.

Garcia likes to recall his role, during his first term as president, in getting the U.S. to recognize its responsibility for the drug trade's destabilization of the region. In 1990 in Cartagena, Colombia, Garcia prodded President George H. Bush to back up Washington's stated desire to assist the region in combating drugs. "Where's the beef?" Garcia said he asked Bush.

Ten years later, the U.S. agreed to a multi-billion dollar package in support of Plan Colombia. Peru was largely ignored as it was less concerned with narco-trafficking than with bringing the Fujimori saga to an end.

Now, after a 16 year hiatus, Garcia is once again president and prodding another U.S. leader. During a visit to Washington in June, he told President Obama that because of successes in Colombia, drug trafficking problems are moving back to Peru. Indeed, according to the United Nations, Peru once again rivals Colombia in coca production. "It is the U.S.'s fault," he chided Obama, and suggested that Peru would benefit from the same kind of assistance Colombia has received.



Needless to say, other Andean leaders haven't exactly put themselves in a place to ask for assistance.

Chavez is currently asking Obama to withdraw his nomination of Larry Palmer to be the next ambassador to Venezuela because Palmer has expressed concerns over Venezuela's ties with the FARC. Meanwhile, Bolivia hasn't had a U.S. ambassador for

nearly two years since President Evo Morales accused Philip Goldberg of conspiring against democracy and expelled him from La Paz.

Both Morales and Chavez have expelled the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency ending decades of cooperation. And Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa unilaterally decided not to extend a lease to the U.S. military, which for ten years allowed its personnel to carry out anti drug surveillance flights from a base in Manta.

To make up for the loss of Manta, Colombia agreed to allow the U.S. military to expand their use of seven Colombian bases, an agreement that produced an outcry from other regional leaders. But in an interview with Colombia's daily El Espectador, new Colombian Defense Minister Rodrigo Rivera defended the agreement as a logical extension "of a long tradition" of U.S.-Colombia cooperation against drug trafficking. "Those who know of security and defense understand that international assistance is key to confront that threat."

Garcia clearly understands this. Unfortunately, as criminals continue to create greater instability and insecurity region wide, few others have adopted his attitude.

Marcela Sanchez is one of the most respected journalists writing about Latin America, as evidenced by her work for the most important papers in the United States -- including both the New York Times

and The Washington Post -- as well as the two most important newspapers in Colombia -- El Espectador and El Tiempo -- Colombia's En Vivo and QAP TV channels, and Venezuela's Daily Journal. We welcome her back to the Latin American Herald Tribune, where her hemispheric wisdom appears every Friday.



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