

## **ONLY JOINT ACTION CAN COUNTER ANDEAN TENSIONS**

by **JUAN GABRIEL TOKATLIAN\***

The largest countries in the Americas - the US, Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina - will soon face a serious security threat if they do not deal quickly with the deteriorating situation on South America's Andean ridge. A fast-moving political blight is spreading across the Andes, which if left unchecked, will fuel chronic instability in the western hemisphere. Fixing the region is not the US's responsibility alone; it requires a long-term, joint effort from the continent's largest countries. The first administration of George W. Bush either neglected or manipulated the geopolitical value of this region by "de-institutionalising" the US-Andes agenda and orienting it too much toward fighting narcotics. The second Bush administration should search for a collective solution to regional unrest.

Today, the five Andean countries - Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela - epitomise the dark side of regional politics. They are the poster boys for massive poverty, a growing drug industry, gross violations of human rights, rising organised crime, environmental exhaustion and rampant corruption. As they descend into turmoil, the Andean area is becoming a serious security concern.

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Several key questions regarding the Andean ridge area have been either downplayed or distorted by Washington. First, the forces behind the Bolivarian revolution led by Hugo Chávez, Venezuelan president, will continue their efforts to be emulated in the area - similar to other Latin American experiences such as the Peronist revolution of the 1950s, the Castro revolution of the 1960s and the Sandinista revolution of the 1970s. Mr Chávez's most recent democratic victory provides additional momentum to this aspiration. It is essential for external powers to develop a *modus vivendi* with him until he understands that his revolutionary ideals should be restricted to Venezuela. Stigmatising Mr Chávez as the "Saddam Hussein of the Andes", or encouraging the most extreme elements of the opposition, will merely end up triggering a civil war in Venezuela.

Second, the Colombian armed conflict is barely "stabilised", contrary to claims by some western officials. Notwithstanding President Alvaro Uribe's hard-line policies, the radical guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia are not strategically defeated and the so-called peace process with right-wing paramilitaries is extremely fragile. Dozens of Colombian drug traffickers have been extradited to the US and hundred of thousands of hectares of illicit crops have been chemically fumigated, but with limited impact in terms of drug use in the region. Colombians do not generally welcome the overwhelming amounts of US assistance and presence - with one of the largest US embassies in the world - in their country. The potential, direct involvement of US troops in countering guerrilla forces there could only ignite more troubles in the country and its vicinity. The temptation by Washington to transform Mr Uribe into a sort of Ariel Sharon of the Andes - to balance the growing power of Mr Chávez - will only internationalise Colombia's domestic conflict.

Third, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador are becoming critical examples of growing and partially failed states, unable to cope with increasing social and ethnic demands after more than a decade of neoliberal reforms. There is no domino effect among them and each country, individually, is witnessing a crisis in its traditional leadership with an open outcome: uncertainty whether replacement of the current elites will be peaceful or violent. Choice and circumstance may interact virtuously or viciously. Meanwhile, trade negotiations between some Andean countries and Washington will not necessarily be an insurance against institutional turmoil, social fragmentation or ethnic violence.

Thus, the US, Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina must come together to lead a fresh, sustained effort to address the underlying social, economic and political issues driving the widespread chaos and lack of governance on the Andean ridge.

The administrations in Washington, Ottawa, Mexico City, Brasilia and Buenos Aires share responsibility for stabilising the Andean region by peaceful and positive means. If the politics of denial prevail, as they did in the first Bush administration, a mixture of territorial, ethnic and political "balkanisation" of the Andean region looms on the horizon. The result will be a fast and frantic export of violence, volatility, narcotics and migrants to the north and south of the western hemisphere.

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## **THE AMERICAS NEED A BOLD NEW POLICY ON DRUGS**

by **JUAN GABRIEL TOKATLIAN**\*

Narcotics still pose a pressing problem in the US, more than four decades after the current policy to tackle them was first developed. The drug war has not worked and, although the blight of drugs is getting worse, most politicians shy away from discussing the issue. This is a big mistake. The politics of denial ends up justifying a continuous futile crusade. Nearly \$400bn of public money has been devoted to different anti-drug activities during the past 20 years, with limited success.

After spending so much to control the drug phenomenon, what went wrong? In essence, the national and international drug control strategy promulgated by the US during the last four administrations has been flawed. If abstinence is the most important target of prohibition, the figures regarding new use and more abuse of drugs and the data on drug-related criminality and youth drug-initiation reveal a costly failure. Notwithstanding the efforts and the unprecedented percentage of federal and state inmates incarcerated for drug offences, the truth is that this policy is close to collapse. And most illegal drugs are now more easily available, purer and cheaper than in the early 1980s.

The US drug strategy is double-edged. First, to reduce the price at the production stage and to improve eradication methods, discouraging peasants from cultivating illicit

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crops. Second, to strengthen interdiction at the processing and transit countries to reduce the availability and potency of drugs in the US and to enhance seizures at US borders, thus elevating the domestic price of narcotics and deterring potential consumers.

In contrast to what was expected and desired, and as unintended effect of the tactics on drugs, American organised crime at home and transnational criminal organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean, in particular, have got richer and more powerful, while US citizens have become less safe and victimised. Prohibition has provided the incentive for a well-organised narco-criminality to diversify the market for drugs, to channel the proceeds through financial havens, and to extend strategic partnerships with other illegal businesses.

The drug phenomenon has created enormous social, political, ecological and military difficulties throughout the Americas. Human rights abuses, environmental catastrophes, imbalances in civil-military relations, institutional corruption, massive civil rights violations, concentration of power in drug Mafia, law enforcement failures, are some of the legacies left by a mistaken war that has concentrated on the supply side of the narcotics question.

The notion of a *Pax Americana* used to convey the sense of a single hegemony by a superpower such as the US. But we may now be witnessing the gradual consolidation of an hemispheric *Pax Mafiosa*: the growing power, and even legitimacy in some cases, of a new criminal social class with the ability, commitment and opportunity to lead. Some rural portions of Colombia and Mexico, some urban ghettos in Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro,

some municipalities in Paraguay and some islands in the Caribbean provide a foretaste of what may happen if the *Pax Mafiosa* becomes consolidated nationally and continentally in the years to come. The *Pax Mafiosa* would have dire consequences: the establishment of kleptocratic governments, the breakdown of the rule of law, highly violent environments, extended social polarisation, potential sanctuary for terrorist activities and, very probably, failing states.

On Monday, the most important inter-american body, the Organization of American States will look to choose a new secretary general. Whoever is elected, the major undertaking should be to convene a high level summit to debate and promote a new, bold policy on drugs for the Americas. This should include developing policies to strengthen legality and statehood, acting in concert to avoid spillover effects in the region, concentrating the public policy on drugs around demand control and harm reduction, and avoiding military solutions to social ills. The continent does not need a rehearsal of a failed war against narcotics; we all need a preventive diplomacy to curtail a regional *Pax Mafiosa*.

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