

The U K Defence Forum is publishing a political overview of Colombia by Research Associate Adam Dempsey on its website (www.ukdf.org.uk) to describe the context of the October 2009 agreement between Colombia and the USA on seven bases for US forces. In its introduction it says:

Despite being one of the oldest democracies in the world, Colombia's post-independence history has been punctuated by prolonged periods of political violence. With each instance of political unrest foundations were laid within Colombia for further internal struggles. Yet with Colombia's changing importance to global politics and economics the dynamics of political conflict have also been subject to change.

The influence of Colombia's illicit narcotics industry upon society has been pervasive and long-lasting. Irrespective of ideological differences, all of Colombia's paramilitary groups have earned economic power as well as social and political capital from the production and trafficking of narcotics. This has led to parts of Colombia becoming states-within-states, where the influence of the paramilitaries has exceeded that of the state. The financial power of Colombia's narcotics industry has also ensured it a presence within the mechanisms of national government.

In President Alvaro Uribe Velez, Colombia appears to have a leader with a more assertive determination to curb the power of the paramilitaries and the narcotics industry. Uribe's approach has been to tie the military and political support of the United States to social initiatives that break the grip of the paramilitaries and coca production over parts of Colombia's more vulnerable regions. Yet as Uribe's own personal history best demonstrates, breaking Colombia's ties with such formidable institutions is likely to remain a work in progress.

President Chavez is (November 9, 2009) telling his troops to "defend the homeland", having recently sent 15,000 to the border. "Let's not waste a day on our main aim: to prepare for war," he's been quoted as saying. Colombia intends to appeal to the United Nations Security Council and the Organisation of American States, saying "The only thing we're interested in is defeating terrorism related to drugs trafficking". Colombia fears Venezuela is "closing the gap between rhetoric and action."

According to the IISS Military Balance, the relative strengths (Colombia/Venezuela) are :

Army 226,352/63,000

Reserves and National Guard : 54,700/31,000

Helicopters (total) 233/96

Navy 30, 729/17,500

Submarines 4/2

Air 2,000/11,500

Combat aircraft 117/94

See also, video footage of Russian Strategic nuclear bombers flying over Cuba en route to Venezuela as part of a training exercise (dated September 15th 2008)