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Colombia in the UN Security Council

SANDRA BORDA AND CARLOS CASTILLO
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- This paper analyzes Colombia's foreign policy strategies by examining the country's behavior in the UN Security Council.

- It examines Colombia's historical positions as a member of the Council as well as its stances during its current tenure, comparing them to those of permanent members and of its non-permanent counterparts.

- It argues that Colombia is no longer unrestrictedly aligned with the positions of other countries but has yet to adopt a clear, long-term strategy for insertion into the international system.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL IN FOCUS

Summary

This paper seeks to contribute to the analysis of Colombia's strategies for insertion into the international system by examining the country's behavior in the United Nations (UN) Security Council. Colombia's recent election as a non-permanent member raises many questions about its priorities and positions on the current state of global security. Two of Colombia's main objectives for the 2011-2012 period in the Security Council were to redefine foreign intervention in Haiti and to consolidate its leadership and its role as the representative of the South American regional bloc.

In advancing these priorities, the Colombian government has found itself both in agreement and at odds with permanent members and with Brazil, its South American counterpart in the council. In order to understand these dynamics of association and Colombia's positions as a non-permanent member in 2011, we examine the history of the country's participation in this UN body and analyze the debates and deliberations surrounding the most emblematic cases taken up by the council in 2011. This analysis includes the subject of UN peacekeeping missions, a debate that arose from discussions about the connections between international cooperation, development, and security; the UN's role in the Haitian crisis; the resolution that established a no-fly zone in Libya; the issue of piracy off the coast of Somalia; the armed conflict in Sudan and the secession of South Sudan; and prospects for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After examining Colombia's positions on these issues, we identify some general trends with regard to the participation and the arguments put forward by the country's delegation in the Council's sessions.

1. Colombia's Background and the International Context

The first time Colombia held a seat in the Security Council in 1947, it abstained from voting on the resolution that divided the Palestinian territories and created the state of Israel, and it opposed the right of veto at the San Francisco Conference, which gave birth to the UN. Between 1953 and 1958, it was elected for two more periods in the Council. Although Colombia was not present for the discussions surrounding the Korean War, it did support the United States' initiative and was the only Latin American country that sent troops to support the mission in South Korea. As for the conflict that erupted during those years as a result of Egypt's nationalist aspirations for controlling the Suez Canal, Colombia's position was in support of free navigation on international waterways.

In 1989 Colombia joined the Council for the fifth time, on this occasion as the representative of the Non-Aligned Movement. This was the first time that Colombia held the responsibility of representing a diplomatic bloc of such magnitude. Colombia voted in favor of condemning the downing of Libyan warplanes by the United States, rejecting the latter's argument upheld that it had acted in legitimate self defense and in accordance with the principles established by the Non-Aligned bloc. It also condemned the illegal occupation of Kuwait on the part of Iraq and supported the economic embargo against the latter. Although it voted in favor of the resolution that authorized the deployment of a multilateral force, the Colombian delegation expressed its inconformity with some passages of the text, which – it claimed – did not clearly specify the limits for the military operation.

Prior to its current participation during the 2011-12 period, Colombia's most recent tenure in the Council (2001-2002) had taken place during the rise of international terrorism as a central issue in the UN's agenda, following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan. In Resolution 1368 (2001), approved unanimously, the Council unequivocally condemned terrorist acts and defined them as one of the most serious threats to international security in the 21st century. The Colombian delegation also played an active role and adopted a critical stance during discussions in the Council about the violations of international law on the part of Israel in the Occupied Territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

2. Colombia in the Security Council in 2011

The cases that we analyze here – the mandate of peacekeeping missions, the UN's role in Haiti, the Libyan intervention, the issue of piracy in Somalia, the secession of South Sudan, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – were chosen because of their current relevance for international politics, their historical importance, their potential for becoming paradigmatic, or their controversial nature.

Colombia's stances regarding these issues will be compared with those of the Council's most prominent permanent members and with those of some of Colombia's non-permanent counterparts.

2.1 The Mandate of Peacekeeping Missions: Cooperation, Intervention, and Security

The stance adopted by the United States – a key frame of reference for understanding Colombia's behavior in the Council – is one that stresses that much has been learned about peacekeeping missions over the past two decades but emphasizes that there is still a long way to go before achieving an adequate implementation of all the lessons learned. In particular, it underscores the need for the governments of individual countries to take responsibility for reconstruction and institutional reform processes. The United States committed itself to continue providing assistance to governments in post-conflict situations to help them establish and implement their own priorities and policy responses (Rice, 2011a).

Along with other non-permanent members, Colombia adopted a much more proactive stance with regard to peacekeeping missions and the scope of their mandates. These countries' stance was to promote a larger commitment to institution-building and seems to showcase an interest in bringing about a new, broader conception of security and stability for guiding the mandates of these missions. In addition, Colombia's emphasis on the problem of organized crime and its interest in linking it to debates about the connections between international cooperation and security demonstrates the extent to which drug trafficking – always a key issue for Colombia at the multilateral level – continues to influence the country's foreign policy.

Another important point in the debate about peacekeeping missions is the question about the connections between security and development, which is in turn crucial for understanding the complex relationship between cooperation and political stability. Colombia's stance in this regard is that the prevention of situations that risk turning into violent political conflicts should be at the core of international cooperation for development. For Colombia, the experiences and lessons learned in different countries around the world should be taken into consideration for designing solid strategies for institutio-

nal consolidation, in order to ensure that such formulas for transition lead to durable peace and are responsive to the needs and circumstances of each particular case (Osorio, 2011b). Colombia's position – which differs considerably from the stance taken by the United States – reflects the alignment of non-permanent Council members in opposition to the five permanent members. On the one hand, the five powers emphasize that the primary responsibility lies in the hands of transitional governments, thus limiting the mandate of peacekeeping missions to assistance, cooperation, and stabilization. On the other hand, non-permanent members advocate for strategies focused on state-building and consolidation as the means for peace, development, and stability.

2.2 The UN in Haiti

Colombia's stance toward the intervention in Haiti exemplifies the disparity between the positions of permanent and non-permanent Council members. Although both blocs have expressed their commitment toward humanitarian interventions, the type of intervention that goes beyond stabilization and gives a larger role to sustained cooperation for economic development and state-building seems to be defended only by non-permanent members. Permanent members – the countries with the highest availability of resources for funding peacekeeping operations – have a more austere approach and are more wary of the risks, uncertainties, and political costs of interventions when defined so broadly.

Regarding the case of Haiti, Colombia's emphasis on the importance of cooperation between the UN and regional organizations, especially the OAS, is a clear reflection of the types of arguments that it has advanced in the Security Council: 1) The need to redirect aid from regional organizations as an instrument for development focused on achieving political stability; and 2) The possibility of questioning and redefining the mandates of peacekeeping missions according to the specific context of the country that is intervened. Haiti represents a particularly important case considering the intensity of its humanitarian crisis (Osorio, 2011a).

As exemplified by the United States and China, the position defended by permanent members is one that advocates for continued assistance. This framework, far from questioning or scrutinizing the viability of existing assis-

tance and intervention efforts, endorses the contents of the mandate given to MINUSTAH. This model does not seem to go beyond an understanding of security as the absence of violence and as the type of prevention achieved through the sustained presence of international troops. Security is not conceived of as a product of tangible structural changes in Haitian society.

Within this framework, US prospects for rebuilding Haiti are limited to the possibility of maintaining a secure environment and creating jobs. It is for this reason that the pledges made by many states during the Haiti donors conference in March 2010 are deemed to be so important. This financial commitment – which, according to the United States, constitutes the most realistic option for international aid to Haiti in the medium and long term – must be kept by the international community; the promised funding must be disbursed, and donors should work together with the transitional government.

2.3 The Intervention in Libya

Colombia's position of support for the resolution that created the no-fly zone in Libya must be analyzed on three different levels: 1) The need to support humanitarian interventions; 2) the proviso about the protection of national sovereignty; and 3) the discrepancy between Colombia's vote in favor of the resolution and the abstention by Brazil, the only other state from its regional bloc that currently holds a seat in the Council. The Colombian delegation explained that it supported Resolution 1973/2011 insofar as it understood its purpose as being purely humanitarian. Colombia's sole objective was to achieve the proper conditions for the protection of civilians from the atrocities committed by an authoritarian regime that had lost all of its legitimacy. Colombia explained later that it would not vote in favor of the indiscriminate use of force or the occupation of a sovereign state. The Colombian government repeated that its vote was in favor of taking action as needed in order to avert the imminent attacks by a regime which, despite its declarations and promises, had made clear that it was not capable of adhering to its international commitment to protect its own population (Osorio, 2011a).

It is worth highlighting the disagreements that arose within the five permanent members in the case of Libya. In contrast with the situation in Haiti, in which all five

powers share the same apprehension toward a larger commitment, in the case of Libya there was no consensus among them. Their stance on Haiti is that the political costs of intervening are larger than the probability of success, thus discouraging a redefinition of the intervention strategy and a larger commitment in terms of economic, diplomatic, and human resources. In the Libyan case, the window of opportunity opened by the United States for legitimately overthrowing a regime that was clearly antagonistic toward the West in an operation directed by country's own population was not well received by two of the permanent members, namely China and Russia, which expressed their distrust toward adopting the resolution that allowed a no-fly zone in Libya.

Both China and Russia greatly emphasized the importance of the opinion and – therefore – the responsibility of regional organizations, thus reflecting their lack of political will for sharing the responsibility for an intervention which, regardless of the optimal circumstances in terms of the social uprising and the political opportunity for an effective transition, remained uncertain as to its results. It must also be noted that the initiative came from the United States and that NATO was given full command of the operation.

2.4 Piracy in Somalia

As for the security situation in Somalia's maritime borders, where the official presence of the UN system is practically nonexistent, Colombia's position has been to attempt to link the problem of piracy to the context of generalized poverty and precarious institutions in that African country. The governance crisis of which piracy is a part is, for the Colombian delegation, the result of institutional weakness and of Somalia's difficult economic situation. Any future intervention should therefore focus primarily on economic development and on the consolidation of state presence throughout the country's territory (Osorio, 2011a).

In contrast with its modest participation in debates over the situation in Sudan, the Colombian delegation is much more active and open about discussions regarding Somalia. Colombia expressed a conviction that the UN must lead an international response to the issue and that a viable and long-term solution requires a comprehensive approach that includes stabilization as well as the insti-

tutional strengthening of a democratic government in Somalia – a position that clashes once again with the views of permanent members, whose stance about the role of the international community is limited to maintaining its financial commitment and to the deployment of naval security forces.

Colombia's position in this case is coherent with its attitude toward the situation in Haiti, defending the need for dealing with security problems from a broader perspective and asserting that social justice and institutional development are fundamental for the success of peacekeeping.

2.5 The Secession of South Sudan

The separation of South Sudan and its subsequent acceptance as a member of the UN General Assembly seems to be a subject where the positions of permanent and non-permanent Council members overlap. There is general consensus about the notion that these developments were an inevitable consequence of a long list of failures, along with the international community's inability to make the commitments that were required in terms of resources and its lack of political will for reformulating the parameters of intervention and stabilization in Sudan.

Very much like its counterparts in the Council, Colombia celebrated the unanimous vote that favored the nomination of South Sudan as a new UN member state, and it underscored the importance of this step for moving forward successfully with peace negotiations led jointly by the UN and the African Union (AU). The Colombian government also stressed the importance of coordination between the Security Council and regional organizations in cases such as this one. In particular, it made reference to the AU's experience and its fundamental role in defining negotiation frameworks and implementing confidence-building measures to induce all rebel groups involved in this regional conflict to participate in the peace process (Osorio, 2011a).

Some delegations, including that of the United States, emphasized that the successful electoral process, and the successful work of the electoral observation mission, have enhanced the Council's commitment to the peacekeeping mission in Sudan. All member states agreed that these are important steps, but some argued that the situation still calls for more support and for a larger commitment in order to reach an agreement with rebel groups that are not part of the internationally recognized government. Resolution 2003/2011, which was approved unanimously to renew the mandate of UNAMID, reflects the existing consensus and political will for supporting intervention in Sudan following the successful electoral process as reported by UN, European Union, Arab League, and other international monitors.

2.6 The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Political stability in the Middle East, given its geostrategic relevance and its importance for the world energy market, has been a priority for the Security Council for many decades. The Council's political responsibility for the creation of the state of Israel in the late 1940s and the social and political conflicts that resulted from that decision have given this issue a privileged place in the Council's agenda. Following a string of wars and failed peace negotiations in recent decades, in 2011 there was a new glimmer of hope for the resolution of one of the world's most controversial and long-lasting armed conflicts. In late September, Palestine officially requested formal recognition as a state before the Security Council. At the time of writing this policy paper, no decision had been made public about this matter. In the Council, Palestine must obtain nine votes in favor without a veto for its request to be approved. The United States has already declared that it will exert its veto to block the initiative.

Colombia has historically advocated for the creation of two sovereign and independent states as a solution to the conflict. It stresses, however, that the start of a peace process is a necessary condition for achieving that objective and for promoting security in the region (Osorio, 2011a). In this sense, Colombia's stance is the same as that of the United States.

With regard to issues of human rights, there seems to be a general consensus among all Security Council members. Respect for human rights in the Occupied Territories is seen as a fundamental matter for negotiations. In this sense, the successful efforts on the part of the international community to end the recent Israeli blockade of Gaza – a situation that had put Palestinians in a position of extreme economic vulnerability – and to lift the ban on exports from Gaza are worth highlighting.

Despite concurring with Colombia in some aspects, the United States has always held that the solution to the conflict must be the outcome of a negotiation between the two parties. Thus, it has opposed the Security Council's involvement through decisions that may go against a peaceful solution reached through bilateral negotiations (Masilko, 2011b). For this very reason, it has emphasized that the recognition of a Palestinian state cannot come from the UN, but it must be the result of a political agreement between the parties in conflict.

The fundamental distinction between the positions of Colombia and the United States lies in the level of involvement that they believe the Security Council should have with regard to the subject of Israel and Palestine. Discrepancies between the two countries about this issue are not new, nor have they had any serious consequences or caused any diplomatic frictions between them.

3. Conclusions

Given the lack of a comprehensive, long-term foreign policy strategy on the part of the current Colombian government, the country's ongoing participation in the Security Council has been guided more by historical convention than by any attempt to renew the country's international strategy. Continuity, thus, has prevailed. In general, when it has come to decisive votes, Colombia has opted for maintaining positions that go along with those of the United States.

The Colombian government has nonetheless moved closer to Brazil and other non-permanent members in connection with cases such as Somalia and Haiti, seeking to link the issues of security, development, state-building, and cooperation together on a more conceptual level when discussing how to solve these crises. This search for a broader mandate for the Security Council is clearly at odds with the stances of permanent members, which call for a strategy that is less ambitious and more focused on the shorter term.

Overall, Colombia appears to be implementing a highly pragmatic and non-aligned strategy which does not necessarily entail siding with non-permanent members on every issue but which also does not place it entirely on the side of permanent members. The old premise according to which Colombian foreign policy is unconditionally aligned with US positions does not apply to the country's behavior in the Security Council. At the same time, however, Colombia has not represented the positions of Latin American countries. Such positions are varied, but for the most part they are very different from the stances adopted by Colombia during its current stint in the Council.

Until now, the lesson to be drawn from Colombia's behavior in the Security Council is clear: unrestricted and unconditional alignments are a thing of the past. Still, even the most basic and detached pragmatism follows some sort of logic or has some sense of direction. For Colombian foreign policy, that direction still remains undefined.

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About the authors

Sandra Borda is a Professor of Political Science at the Universidad de Los Andes, and Coordinator of the Program for Regional Security in Colombia, FESCOL.

Carlos Castillo is a Master's student in Political Science at the Universidad de Los Andes, and research assistant at the Center for American Studies (CEE).

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