

COLOMBIA'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:

A Search for an Independent Role

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- ¿CAMBIO DE NORTE? MOMENTOS CRITICOS DE LA POLITICA EXTERIOR COLOMBIANA. By Martha Ardila. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1991. Pp. 252.)
- HEGEMONY AND INDEPENDENCE: COLOMBIA AND THE UNITED STATES SINCE THE WARS FOR INDEPENDENCE. By Stephen J. Randall. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992. Pp. 325. \$40.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.)
- REFLEXIONES SOBRE POLITICA INTERNACIONAL. Edited by Guillermo Fernández de Soto. (Bogotá: Editorial Kimpres, 1992. Pp. 348.)
- COLOMBIA Y AMERICA LATINA FRENTE A EUROPA, 1992. (Bogotá: FES-COL, 1991. Pp. 235.)

It is only reasonable to believe that given Colombia's strategic location, economic resources, and the general competence of its governing class, the country should have played a far more prominent and independent role in the international arena. Indeed, Colombia (then the core entity of the República de Gran Colombia) was the first of the newly independent Latin American countries to try to establish a framework of international relations, when President Simón Bolívar called for an inter-American conference in 1824. Yet the promises of that early initiative were not fulfilled, and Colombia is still struggling today to find a distinct and credible role in the world of international politics.

Two of the four works under review here provide the historical bases for explaining Colombia's failure to assume greater leadership within the hemisphere. Stephen Randall's *Colombia and the United States: Hegemony and Interdependence* (simultaneously published in Spanish as *Aliados y distantes: historia de las relaciones entre Colombia y EE. UU. desde la independencia hasta la guerra contra las drogas*) provides a broad account of Colombia's relations with the United States from the early nineteenth century to 1990. In doing so, Randall shows how Colombia did its best, despite recurring political strife and economic dislocations, to protect what were considered to be its vital interests.

Randall portrays Colombia as a country that emerged out of the

wars for independence with the potential for playing a significant role in the international relations of the Western Hemisphere. But that potential, according to his account, has been consistently undermined throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by policies maintained by the United States. Randall asserts that from the beginning, when Bolívar called for a hemispheric conference in 1824, on through the separation of Panama from the national territory and the more recent pressures on Colombia to control the export of drugs, the United States has disregarded Colombia's vital interests and treated the country as weak and insignificant.

Without question, the most grievous manifestation of U.S. disregard for Colombia was its loss of Panama in 1903 as the result of U.S. instigations. In conducting its international relations, Colombia had considered Panama as a trump card that could be played whenever needed to gain recognition and prestige. Losing that possession led Colombia to abandon all hope of prominence among the countries of the hemisphere and virtually withdraw from international activities.

Colombia did not reemerge on the international scene until ten years later, when it negotiated the Urrutia-Thomson Treaty with the United States in 1914. Seeking to mend the rift between Colombia and the United States resulting from the Panama Canal crisis, this treaty triggered a reassessment of Colombian foreign policy. Martha Ardila presents a history and her own analysis of that process in *¿Cambio de norte? momentos críticos de la política exterior colombiana*.

Ardila finds that in the aftermath of the ratification of the Urrutia-Thomson treaty, Colombia made a conscious and determined decision, despite significant opposition, to accept a status subordinate to the interests of the United States. That basic principle of foreign policy became known as *Respice Polum* (meaning looking to the northern star, or the United States). This policy was conceived and promoted by Marco Fidel Suárez while serving as the Colombian Minister of Foreign Relations under President José Vicente Concha (1914–1918). Since that time, *Respice Polum* has effectively guided Colombian policy in international relations.

During President Alfonso López Michelsen's term in office (1974–1978), he attempted to propose an alternative known as *Respice Similia* (meaning looking to similars, that is, countries whose situation resembles that of Colombia). Subsequent events precluded its full articulation, however.

Ardila also finds that although Colombian foreign policy since the late 1910s has been governed by the principle of *Respice Polum*, constant efforts have been made to find ways to exercise some measure of independence. This strategy, which Ardila calls "active subordination," allowed Colombia to take advantage of opportunities that arose to act independently while remaining respectful of the broad constraints established by U.S. hegemony.

To illustrate the workings of the strategy of active subordination, Ardila analyzed Colombian foreign-policy orientation during five distinct periods. These junctures, which Ardila calls “critical moments,” coincided with the administration of six different presidents: Marco Fidel Suárez (1918–1921), Alfonso López Pumarejo (1942–1945), Guillermo León Valencia (1962–1966), Belisario Betancur (1982–1986), Virgilio Barco (1986–1990), and César Gaviria (1990 to the present). These critical moments exemplify numerous instances in which Colombia took measures emphasizing an independent foreign policy without abandoning the basic principle of *Respecto Polum*.

President Belisario Betancur’s administration provides perhaps the most dramatic examples of what a strategy of active subordination can accomplish in formulating Colombian foreign policy. Many of these examples are discussed and synthesized in *Reflexiones sobre política internacional*, a collection of lectures, newspaper articles, and previously unpublished writings by Guillermo Fernández de Soto.

A foreign affairs adviser to the Colombian government, Fernández de Soto clearly set out to portray Betancur’s foreign policy as distinct and radically different from previous administrations. He perceives Betancur as having tested the limits of traditional Colombian foreign policy in various ways: in developing closer relationships with what was until recently called the Third World, pursuing membership in the nonaligned movement, attempting to mediate the debt crisis, negotiating with the European Community, redefining bilateral relations with friendly countries, and engaging other Latin American countries in groupings like the Contadora countries in efforts to address and resolve regional problems.

Colombia y América Latina frente a Europa is an edited work containing four articles, two of which pertain to the subject of Colombian international relations. “Las relaciones internacionales de Colombia con la comunidad económica europea” by José Luis Ramírez and “Las relaciones comerciales entre Colombia y la comunidad económica europea” by Marta Jimena Osorio both discuss Colombian efforts to diversify its international relations and to seek new economic outlets for its products since 1980. Ramírez sees hopeful signs for an expanded political relationship between Colombia and the European Economic Community, but Osorio is far more pessimistic about the prospects for a closer economic relationship as the European Economic Community closes its borders to many Colombian products.

The four works considered in this review essay are dissimilar in many respects, but they share the common theme of Colombia’s search for an independent role in international relations. Randall’s *Hegemony and Independence* describes the historical roots of that search, its twists and turns relative to relations with the United States, and ultimately its accomplishments. Ardila’s *¿Cambio de Norte?* places the subject within a

theoretical context and by comparing various periods of Colombian history in the twentieth century shows that a certain form of independent role has been possible. Finally, *Reflexiones sobre política internacional* and *Colombia y América Latina frente a Europa* provide ample and specific evidence that Colombia has already taken giant steps in the past ten years toward establishing an independent role in conducting its international relations.

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